



Capturing Perfection

Author: *Trina Lane*

Category: Romance, Adult, M-m Romance

Description: A shattered bond. A love unspoken. Can two broken men find redemption in the wreckage of their past?

Clayton Phillips and Logan Callen forged an unbreakable bond at thirteen—two foster brothers who whose turbulent pasts made them each other's lifeline. They promised to always be there for one another, no matter what. But one confession shattered everything. Sixteen years later, the men find themselves face-to-face again, but their reunion is anything but sweet.

Logan's world went silent the moment a traumatic head injury on deployment stole his hearing. Add that to his struggles with PTSD after losing his team and he's having to navigate a new reality. Locked in a cycle of self recrimination and isolation, Logan reaches out to Clay to help him get back on his feet. His former best friend is the last man he'd ever thought to see again, but the only man he trusts.

Clay stood alone in the world until Logan came to live with his foster family. He'd trusted Logan with his friendship, and they built a home together to weather the world's storms. However, Clay's world shattered the day Logan walked out of his life after Clay revealed his sexuality. Now a detective in Boston, Clay has found his footing and surrounded himself with a found family. However, Clay never gave up hope Logan would eventually find his way home. When he gets the call that Logan's time in the Rangers is over, he sees one last chance to heal their fractured bond. But the man who confronts him is a stranger—shattered, distant, and guarded.

Together they build fragile bridges connecting their present and past. But both men carry a secret so deep it threatens to collapse the tentative bond: They've been in love with each other all along. With the past weighing them down and the future uncertain, can love survive the wounds they've both suffered, or is it too late to capture perfection?

Total Pages (Source): 51

Chapter One

Detective Clayton Phillips stared at the screen of his ancient desktop as the words of the report for his latest bust ticked onto the screen letter by letter. He swore he had the slowest computer in the entire precinct. The letter keys were so stiff that each strike felt as if he were taking a gavel to a strong man's attraction at the local carnival. The monitor had the annoying habit of sometimes flickering colors from magenta to a greenish yellow, and he heard grinding noises from the CPU sitting on the floor at his feet. He could usually get the monitor to behave if he gave it a few hard smacks, but he'd gotten dirty looks from the IT gremlins when he suggested he try the same thing with the tower. His sergeant told him to put in a requisition request for a laptop, but Clay wasn't holding his breath of that coming to fruition anytime soon.

His frustration levels had reached maximum capacity. Of course, it didn't help that the maintenance crew was working on the air conditioning in his South Boston station, and the air in his office was as stifling as the dankest jungle on earth.

A drop of sweat trickled down his temple, and the cotton of his shirt stuck to his damp back in the July heat. A fresh cup of coffee sat on his desk. As much as he needed the caffeine after spending all last night on a stakeout, he couldn't stomach the idea of drinking something hot. He could make it an iced coffee, but that would require the station breakroom icemaker to work, or he could beg an energy drink off one of his colleagues. Dalton usually had some stashed in his desk. However, Clay was on Dalton's shit list at the moment because he'd drank the man's protein shake the other day. To be fair, Clay bought the same brand, and he'd forgotten that he'd finished his last one. His shopping list told him to restock his supply, but he'd yet to make it to the store this week. Dalton would get over his snit when Clay gifted him a

couple of replacements and throw in some goldfish crackers. The man's hangriness resembled a toddler's, but bribery worked on him just as easily.

He scrolled his mouse to the top of the report; the cursor leaving a faint white trail behind, and methodically re-read every line, double-checking the accuracy of each detail. A frustrated sigh escaped his lips as he finished reading the suspect's confession.

Criminals may be getting dumber every day, or with the massive hike in inflation the last few years and the cost of necessities skyrocketing, more people were getting desperate enough to commit stupid crimes. Take, for instance, this last case. Unemployed for the past three months, a twenty-two-year-old construction worker resorted to shoplifting from a local convenience store. What could have been a Class C misdemeanor, a minor offense, escalated into a serious felony when the clerk, in a moment of heightened tension and fear, confronted the attempted thief with a firearm he had been keeping concealed beneath the counter. During their struggle, the gun accidentally discharged, tragically resulting in the clerk's death. Clay had brought the suspect in, and as soon as the man was in the room for questioning, he broke down, sobbing and explaining that his sole motivation was getting diapers for his kid. One man died, and the incident profoundly and irreversibly altered another man's life. In his heart, he hoped that the district attorney wouldn't put the screws to the kid too badly. The circumstances made Clay sympathetic, although he knew the man had to pay for his crime.

Clay clicked the file closed and sent it off to his captain. As he did, his eyes landed on the photo of Logan, his foster brother. The photo showed Logan in full combat fatigues and field gear. Behind him was a snow-capped mountain, and beneath his feet was the arid ground of Afghanistan. On his face was a smile Clay hadn't seen since their early college days together, before everything had changed. He touched the image in the metal frame, wishing he knew how to help Logan find that smile again.

That he and Logan once again lived in the same city—not to mention the same apartment—was a miracle. But it paled compared to old times. Logan hadn't survived his time in the service without scars. Both internal and external. A medical discharge prematurely ended his career as an Army Ranger. But had Logan contacted Clay when his injury changed the trajectory of his life? No. Had it not been for a phone call from one of Logan's platoon buddies, alerting Clay to his separation from the military and expressing concern that Logan might end up on the streets, Clay was certain he would never have been in contact with Logan again. Clay had begged for details about Logan's flight home before his teammate had finished talking.

Sixteen years ago, Clay's youthful recklessness had caused a significant rift in his relationship with Logan, a fracture that still resonated. Over time, Clay had come to accept the heavy weight of guilt he carried for driving his best friend away. Nine years had passed since he'd last seen Logan, and though he'd striven to progress and rebuild his life, a persistent and unshakeable hollowness lingered within him, a void that no amount of forward momentum could ever seem to fill. However, regardless of time passed and the turmoil of a strained relationship, there was no way he'd turn his back on Logan. With Logan now living in his home, Clay was resolute in his commitment to aid Logan's recovery from his injuries and, equally important, to restore the deep bond they had forged since their shared arrival in the Shelby household at thirteen.

Clayton and Logan, the deadly duo as Mrs. Shelby had once called them, had been inseparable throughout their teen years. When their individual worlds had exploded, the foster system had thrown together the two teenagers, and they'd forged a bond thicker than the blood of those relatives who'd mistreated them. Being foster brothers in a house filled with love but meagre means, it was second nature to share everything. When Clay had suspected he differed from their peers, it prompted the first secret he'd kept from Logan.

In high school, it had been easy to put off any unwanted advances of the female variety. They'd always been busy with one sports team or another. They'd known

scholarships were their way to college since they had no family to pay the way. As much as the Shelbys loved them, there was no extra cash to pay college tuition for a couple of kids they'd taken in from social services. When Clay and Logan weren't practicing or competing, they'd hit the books with uncharacteristic teenage zeal.

Eventually both of them earned enough need and merit based funding to make up the bulk of the tuition for the University of Massachusetts. The financial aid office helped them apply for loans to make up the difference and they'd enrolled. Without the support of the Department of Children and Families, Clay and Logan navigated life on their own. The Shelbys kept in touch, but Clay and Logan tried not to take advantage of their generous hearts. As their world expanded with new friends and opportunities on campus, Clay found it difficult to suppress his private longings. A quiet battle waged beneath the surface of his daily routines. By sophomore year, restless and yearning to experience an intimate connection with another person, he'd been ready for a change. However, life was a cruel bitch because while his dick would twitch at the hot guys in the classes or at the gym, his heart only beat for one man. Logan. Clay believed revealing his sexuality to Logan would inevitably reveal his feelings for him. Clay loved his foster brother, but knew Logan's history meant his love would never be reciprocated.

So here he sat in his cramped office with probably a hundred hours of work that needed his attention, but his mind drifted through time back to that night at the end of their spring semester sophomore year...

He sat on the couch in their cramped, nearly uninhabitable apartment watching a movie. He looked over at Logan, who was reading the chapter assignment for their Policing the Urban Milieu class.

"So ... I have a date this Friday," he stated.

"Really? Since when have you sought a girlfriend?"

“I didn’t say it was a girl,” Clay said under his breath.

Logan slammed his book shut and stared in shock. “Clay?”

He shut off the TV and faced Logan. He rubbed his hands across his face several times and took a deep breath. “I’m gay. I’ve known it for a long time, but never said anything because I wasn’t ready to deal with it. Not to mention, with everything you went through, I figured you wouldn’t want to hear about it. I’m tired of sleeping alone. I’m tired of being alone.”

“I didn’t think either of us were alone.”

Clay winced at the hurt expression in Logan’s eyes. Those smoky blue eyes that could pull his deepest darkest secrets from him with a simple look or make his heart race in a saccadic rhythm faster than the beat of a hummingbird’s wings. Admitting to Logan his proclivities towards their sex was one thing; it was quite another to confess why his breath caught every time Logan touched him. Or why his cock thickened when he caught Logan dashing into their bedroom, fresh from the shower. It was completely impossible to declare, when on the rare occasions he heard Logan jack off at night in the twin bed across the room, Clay wished it was his hand wrapped around Logan’s cock or his mouth tasting the salty essence as he found release.

“I don’t mean alone, alone. I just mean, I’m tired of not having someone to touch. Someone to touch me. I love you, Logan, but that’s something we could never have.”

It was something they could never have. To think otherwise would lead both of them down a road ending in disaster, and he couldn’t put that on Logan. He couldn’t hurt the one person who’d stuck with him. His drunken father never had cared enough to feed him, let alone show love; his mother had run off before he’d turned three. Clay couldn’t even remember her. But from the time Logan showed up at the Shelby’s, he’d never abandoned him.

“I see. Well then, congratulations. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Clay had watched as Logan opened his book and started reading again. That was it? No comment? No questions? No yelling? Ohshit ... noyelling. He knew when Logan yelled he was just letting off steam, but when he went silent, watch out because he was really pissed off.

“Logan?”

“Yeah?” He didn’t take his eyes off the page of the book.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, you’re quiet. That means it’s not fine.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:06 pm

“Drop it, Clay.”

He swiped the book from Logan’s hand. “Look at me, Logan.” He winced when the eyes that only a moment ago had been soft and pliant with hurt, now burned with fury.

“Talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. You’re gay. You’re going out on a date because you wanna get laid, and you don’t need me anymore.”

Clay moved closer and attempted to pull Logan into his arms, but Logan jerked away and jumped off their lumpy saggy sprung couch.

Logan backed across the few feet of their living, dining and kitchen area with his hands out. “Don’t touch me!”

Clay’s heart shattered at the distrust in Logan’s voice and stance. He knew Logan had issues with homosexuality. He wasn’t a bigot. He was a victim, and all those fears and memories were clearly rearing their ugly head. Clay tried to tell himself that it wasn’t him Logan was running from; it was the past, but that didn’t stop the pain.

“That’s not it at all! Yes, I want to date, and yeah, I wanna get laid. Don’t tell me your right hand doesn’t get tired from time to time. But to say I don’t need you? That’s ridiculous. I’ll always need you.”

“Well, maybe, I don’t want you anymore.”

A searing pain ripped through Clay's chest as Logan stared daggers at him for a few seconds, then walked out of the apartment...

After that confrontation, Clay remained in bed for two days, the sheets damp with tears and his thoughts heavy with regret. Logan had never returned to the apartment, but Clay had hoped to see him at the exam for their Sociological Methods class. However, when he'd arrived and Logan was conspicuously absent, his professor informed him that Logan had pleaded to take the exam earlier that day. Clay came home to find the apartment devoid of Logan's things; his clothes and books were gone, leaving behind an unsettling vacuum. Logan left no note, and Clay knew his confession had turned the love of his only steadfast supporter into hate.

Now, sixteen years later, Logan was back, and the adult who lived with him was a shell of the young man he'd loved. In the month since his discharge, each moment of silence that stretched between them was agonizingly painful. He knew Logan was trying to adapt to his limitations after his injury, but God, Clay missed him.

The ringing of his phone sliced through his melancholy thoughts, startling him from his reverie. Before he lifted the receiver to his ear, he took one last look at the photograph, his eyes lingering on the smiling face captured within.

"Hello?"

"Detective Phillips?"

"Yes."

"This is Lieutenant Armstrong over in district A-1. We received a call from Ho Yuen Bakery in Chinatown. It appears that a man by the name of Logan Callen is causing some type of disturbance in the establishment. We ran his name in the system, and it came up that your addresses match."

Clay stood and looked around his desk to make sure he had his badge, weapon, wallet, and keys. “He’s an old friend crashing with at my place for the foreseeable future. What’s going on? Logan’s not violent.”

Clay crossed his fingers for the small fib. Logan had a nasty temper when pushed, and Clay suspected the things Logan had seen and done in the Rangers would make most people avert their gaze, like watching a horror film. However, Logan wasn’t violent by nature.

“All I know is that some patron called the police saying Mr. Callen suddenly screamed, and now he won’t speak to anyone or move.”

“Shit. I’m on my way. Can you tell the uniform not to engage? It’s possible he’s having a flashback, or some kind of anxiety attack. They recently medically discharged him from the Rangers because of a combat injury. As far as I know, this is the first time he’s gone over two blocks from the apartment by himself. Also, Logan has a severe hearing loss in both ears, so he can’t actually hear someone speaking to him. I’ve taken up stock in Post-its since he came home.”

“I’ll do what I can, detective, but I suggest hauling your ass to Chinatown as fast as you can.”

Chapter Two

Clay rushed to his vehicle out back. Luckily, he'd snagged a spot when he came back to the station after doing legwork on an investigation that morning. He flew down West Broadway much faster than was safe. The bakery in Chinatown could be as few as seven minutes away from his South Boston station or seventeen minutes, depending on traffic. Clay slammed on the brakes and dodge around clueless driver at Dorchester Avenue intersection.

"Son of a bitch! Get off TikTok and watch what you're doing. I know my black unmarked vehicle blends with other drivers, but that's what the pretty lights and sirens are for asshole!"

Hundreds of feet of train track stretched out beneath him like spaghetti strands on the rail yard. Then Clay made the sharp turn to head toward downtown. To his left, traffic was at a standstill on I-93. Once he turned onto Kneeland, Clay knew things would get tricky. The tighter congested streets from Hudson to Beach meant more weaving and horn blaring. What the hell was going on with Logan?

He'd struggled with PTSD since his return. Clay knew Logan got nervous around groups of people. The night he'd brought Logan home, they'd gone to dinner at what used to be their favorite diner. They hardly spoke, and all the while, Logan's body remained as tense as a coiled rattlesnake.

Last week, after Clay had taken Logan to the VA clinic in Jamaica Plain to get his meds refilled, they'd come home, and Logan had enclosed himself in his room for the next two days. Clay had heard Logan scream out in his sleep at night, but since Logan seemed to resent having to live with Clay again, Clay hadn't tried to confront him about the obvious nightmares.

Sometimes, it felt as if those screams in the night were the only sign Logan even lived with him. Mostly, it felt as if a ghost inhabited his apartment. The only thing that Clay had gotten Logan to talk about was the cause of his sudden hearing loss. Well, not so much talk as recite.

On the day that he arrived in Georgia to pick up Logan, he received the emotionally flat announcement from Logan himself that a nearby explosion had resulted in bilateral fractures of the temporal bones in his skull. The traumatic fractures he sustained led to a profound and bilateral sensorineural hearing loss, significantly impacting his auditory capabilities. Because Logan had difficulty hearing, he

requested that Clay, should he choose to speak to him, enunciate while maintaining direct eye contact so that Logan could lip-read. With a resolute turn of his back, the stoic man silently walked over to the car and got inside. The homecoming was not what Clay had imagined throughout the years, a stark contrast to his dreams, and it became also apparent that he lacked the understanding of the magnitude of Logan's ordeal.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:06 pm

He made the left-hand turn onto Beach Street and ahead of him saw the lights of the blue and white Ford Interceptor Utility parked in front of the entrance. The uniforms had already arrived. He double parked, keeping his lights on, then jumped out of the car. A sizeable crowd loitered in the street, no doubt trying to catch the latest cop drama gossip. He showed the officer at the door his shield.

“That’s my roommate in there.”

“Yes, Sir. The lieutenant radioed. Go on in.”

As Clay stepped into the bakery, the scents of traditional Chinese treats hit him. His stomach rumbled, reminding him he’d never eaten lunch earlier. Logan sat on the floor in front of the counter. He curled his six-foot-three-inch, muscled frame into a tiny ball, his eyes glazed and sounds unintelligible. He pressed his back against the counter and wrapped his arms tight around his knees. The old lady behind the counter yelled in Chinese, waving her arms towards the door. Clay had no idea what she said, but it probably had something to do with the disruption of their business.

“Ma’am. Please stop yelling. Give me a moment to take care of this, then your customers can come back in.”

She made a frustrated gesture and spewed more rapid-fire Chinese at him before turning around to go into the backroom. Sighing, Clay looked down at Logan, who appeared locked in a flashback. There was no recognition of his current surroundings. Clay knelt on the floor in front of Logan and placed a hand on his shin to draw him away from the vision. The crisp hairs on Logan’s leg scratched against his palm. The muscled calf was firm and warm. He wrapped his hand around it and gave a gentle

squeeze.

“Logan?”

There was no response.

He squeezed a little harder. “Logan?”

Nothing.

He was clueless about what to do. While the department provided them with training on de-escalation of situations, Clay didn't have direct experience in talking a person out of a flashback. People locked inside their own traumatic visions contrasted sharply with talking down a hostage taker or person threatening suicide. Suddenly, he remembered watching a movie where some Vietnam soldier was stuck in a flashback, and they had to address him as a soldier before he came out of it. Clay did not know if this would work and, frankly, felt a little stupid taking advice from Hollywood, but if it got Logan to snap out of it, he could get them out of here. He stood up, and in his most commanding voice, making sure he yelled loud enough to compensate for Logan's hearing loss, he snapped. “Sergeant Callen?”

The haze in Logan's eyes remained. Clay's voice went unrecognized. He tried again, “Sergeant Callen!” Nothing.

Shit! Now What?

Clay squatted in front of Logan. He didn't know if Logan's hearing loss prevented him from breaking free of the trance, or if Clay's Hollywood trick hadn't worked. Maybe physical stimulation would free Logan. Clay continued to rub Logan's shins. After about a minute, he was growing both increasingly worried and frustrated. Clay pinched one of Logan's hairs between his fingers and yanked.

There was a flash of something in Logan's eyes. Clay really didn't want to hurt Logan, but at this point he was desperate. He pulled another hair and Logan flinched.

Clay watched as Logan's eyes slowly came into focus. Logan's body started to shake, and Clay dropped to his knees. He gathered the strong man into his arms and held him. "I've got you."

He knew Logan couldn't hear him or read his lips at the moment, but hopefully, Logan felt his chest vibrating and took the sensations for the soothing they were intended to be. His hand rubbed up and down Logan's back, the shaking slowly eased. He knew this was hardly the time, but the feel of Logan in his arms nearly sent him into an altered state. Heat radiated off Logan's hard body, seeping through his light cotton T-shirt. Clay felt the muscles of Logan's back contracting and wished he could feel their steely strength beneath smooth bare skin. He leaned back and looked into Logan's now aware eyes.

"You with me?"

Logan nodded. Clay helped Logan to his feet, and Logan's anxious gaze scanned the surrounding area. Clay recognized the moment Logan became aware of what had happened. His smoky blue eyes flashed sadness and resignation for a moment before turning hard with anger. Clay didn't know if Logan was angry with himself or with Clay.

"Let's go home," he said.

Clay heard a rattling noise and looked down to see Logan gripping a bag in his right hand so hard that the paper was wrinkled beyond hope. His hand trembling caused the sound. Clay took the wrapped food and put his arm around Logan. To hold the man up and shield him from the noisy-noiseton's outside.

He nodded to the uniforms standing by the door. "Thank you."

"Good luck, detective. Hey, I know this may seem none of my business or anything, but have you looked into the Home Base program? It's a partnership between Wounded Warrior Project and Mass Gen. Just you know, in case he doesn't want to or can't get help from the VA."

Clay was so glad Logan couldn't hear the officer. He knew the man was only trying to be helpful, but Clay felt the tension radiating from Logan's body and didn't want to make things worse. The man had been completely resistant to seeking mental health services so far. In fact as little as they did speak to each other, Clay knew the one thing that could send them into a total lockdown would be to bring up that topic again.

"Thanks for the info. Can you make sure the owners are squared away?"

The officer and his partner nodded, then Clay headed straight for the black Ford Fusion he'd driven over. He unlocked the vehicle and as soon as the turn signals flashed, Logan pulled away from him. He jerked open the door, climbed into the front seat, then slammed it shut. Clay sighed as he crossed in front of the car. A drier headed down the street blared his horn and Clay stopped in the middle of the street, held up his badge, and stared the man down. Their standoff ended after about thirty seconds, and Clay climbed into his vehicle. The driver took off with a legal amount but aggravated acceleration, and Clay shook his head.

He retraced his path back towards South Boston. His apartment was on West Seventh, only eight blocks from the station. Clay could tell by Logan's stern face that once again, there would be no talking. It was going to be a long trip, especially since now he couldn't use his get out of traffic free lights.

Finding a place in a smaller building thrilled Clay. With only four units, he knew his neighbors enough to be friendly, but not so much they were all up in each other's

lives. The owners had done an excellent job of restoring the interior of the older building. It had a very homey feel for the apartment price. High ceilings helped his and Logan's tall bodies not feel closed in. Hardwood floors negated the need for vacuuming, and a single bathroom minimized cleaning. His last boyfriend had gushed over the crown moldings, coffered ceilings and raised panel wainscoting. He had no idea what that all meant, but the place was home and he liked it.

When Clay opened the door, Logan stepped inside, and it was as if his body simply couldn't hold itself up any longer. The mental and physical strength that had held him upright following the flashback deserted him. Clay saw the sag and wrapped his arm around Logan's waist from behind. He led him into the second bedroom Logan had been using. Clay turned Logan to face him, placing his hands on Logan's broad shoulders.

"You look like you need a rest. I'll get your meds."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:06 pm

He made sure that Logan began to undress and pulled back the covers of the bed before leaving the room.

In the bathroom, Clay looked in the cabinet for Logan's medication. The small compartment was filled with brown prescription bottles all in Logan's name. There were drugs for depression, drugs for anxiety, drugs to make him sleep, drugs to keep him awake. It seemed like every time he took Logan to the clinic for a visit he came home with a new brown bottle.

Clay could make a mint on the street with the inventory in his bathroom. He knew Logan hated the meds, but depended on them to function. Clay loathed enabling the dependency, but he knew they helped Logan calm down and rest easier.

He carried the pills Logan had labeled his 'oh shit, I need something now' drugs into the bedroom with a glass of water and found Logan lying on his side with his back to the door. Clay walked to the other side of the bed and saw that Logan's eyes were wide open. He handed him the medicine, then turned to leave the room but stopped when a barely perceptible voice from the bed called out.

"Stay?"

Clay turned and saw that Logan watched him, the look in his eyes beseeching. For what, he didn't know. Help? Comfort? Whatever it was, there was no ignoring the plea. Clay lay atop of the covers facing Logan. Soft black hair, growing out from the military buzz cut Logan had come home with, begged for Clay's fingers to run through it. Clay resisted the temptation and focused on the blue eyes silently watching him.

“You wanna talk about it?”

Logan shook his head.

“Okay. For now, I want you to sleep. We’ll talk later, and we will talk, Logan. It’s time to stop the ghosting around and avoidance shit. I think what happened today makes that obvious.”

Logan’s blue eyes turned sad again, and it broke Clay’s heart to see how much pain the man he loved but could never have was in. At the moment those eyes closed and Logan’s breathing evened out, Clay vowed he would do whatever it took to break through Logan’s shell. Clay always heard you had to hit bottom before you could bounce back. Hopefully, today was the end of Logan’s downfall.

He scooted to the edge of the bed and stood. Going to the other side, he adjusted the sheet and light blanket covering Logan’s bare back. His fingers burned as they skimmed across the smooth, supple skin. The fires of hell be damned. He couldn’t resist placing a soft kiss on Logan’s shoulder before escaping the room.

Chapter Three

Logan rolled over and blinked several times, trying to get his eyes focused. Three months later, waking in near silence still disoriented him. Silence replaced bird songs and the hum of the air conditioner. He could no longer detect the splash of running water or hear a TV playing. The first weeks after his discharge had been the hardest. Every time he’d woken, he’d tensed every muscle of his body until he made sure his immediate area was secure, using every other sense available.

The aspect that struck him as most odd, however, was that he could no longer perceive his own voice. In the hospital, he’d practiced often for hours, but all he’d noticed were the vibrations in his throat that told him he was vocalizing. He’d

watched his lips in a mirror as he'd spoken, trying to find some connection between the vibrations and the letters he saw forming with his mouth.

The day Clayton had picked him up at Fort Benning, he'd been terrified Clay would look at Logan as if he were speaking in tongues. He'd endlessly practiced his words for Clay; yet, he barely managed to complete a short statement.

Logan knew Clay had concluded that Logan was avoiding him, and maybe he was. But not for the same reason, he suspected Clay thought.

His lifelong communication methods failing him proved unsettling. He didn't want Clay to feel obligated to compensate for his problem. What were they supposed to do? Pass notes back and forth all day as if they were back in high school? The injury had taken not only his ability to hear the sounds but also his brain's ability to process the words. The problem wasn't his brain. His inner ear was the source. The fractures to his cochlea prevented the mechanics of his hearing to transmit the sounds to his auditory nerve. Even if someone yelled at him loud enough, all he heard was a garbled mess.

Clay wanted to talk, too. To talk about what had happened that morning. What the fuck had happened that morning? He'd been doing better over the last couple of weeks. Enough that he thought a trip to Chinatown was within his ability. He'd been craving some pineapple buns and egg custard tarts. One minute, he'd been standing in line, ready to gesture his order to the Chinese-speaking owners, and the next, he was watching Adams' head explode. Oh God, Adams. He missed that bastard so goddamn much. Nobody in their unit had ever suspected, but he and Adams had been hooking up off and on for a couple of years. They weren't each other's soul mates, but they'd been the very best of friends. Logan had turned his back for only a few seconds, but that was all it had taken for the sniper to take out his teammate. Ultimately, Logan was responsible. They watched each other's back, always. And when his was turned, Adams had paid the ultimate price.

And Clay wanted him to talk about it? Logan didn't have to talk to remember what had happened, to know he'd fucked up. He relived it every night in his dreams.

The dirt was loose beneath his boots, dusty brown and arid. The mountains in the distance were hazy as the sun beat down. Something about the situation caught his awareness. He lifted his weapon at the ready, scanning the surrounding area. He heard Adams ask him what was wrong. Something at the crest of the hill, approximately three hundred meters from their position, caught his eye. The air was heavy with silence. Then all hell broke loose.

He turned to see Adams take the bullet to his head, seconds before he heard the report of the shot. He remembered screaming and running towards the fallen soldier, even though logic told him nothing could be done. Several other members from their unit took firing positions, but they couldn't see where the shot had originated. Orders came through to fall back. He grabbed the back of Adams' vest and dragged him toward the APC. The rest of the guys were yelling at him to move his ass as gunfire erupted all around their position. He was only fifteen feet away from cover when a rocket came screaming through the air, and the vehicle exploded. Next thing he knew, he was laying in a bed in the hospital with a busted head and broken ears.

Logan thought back to earlier, when his shields had been at their weakest and he'd asked Clay to stay with him. For a moment, he thought Clay would refuse his request, and he only had himself to blame for the heartrending pain the seconds of indecision caused. He hadn't handled Clay's coming out well. The irony was palpable. One reason he'd run from Clay was because Logan had some serious issues with the abuse in his past, and the reason he'd returned to Clay was because his male lover had been killed, with Logan getting injured in the process.

When Clay came out to Logan in college, there been so many emotions swirling around his brain he'd hadn't been able to grasp just one to form a response. He'd shut down completely. Clay saw Logan's reaction and concluded that Logan was disgusted

by or couldn't tolerate being around a gay man after what happened. But it wasn't that. No. Nor was it the fact that Clay had kept his sexuality a secret from Logan for several years. Okay, maybe the secret thing pissed Logan off. Logan had shared everything with Clay, including why he got pumped into the foster system.

However, what really sent his world into a tailspin was when Clay had said one sentence. I love you Logan, but that's something we could never have. How had Clay known Logan often fantasized about the two of them sharing everything? How had Clay known that, despite his fears, Logan couldn't prevent the youthful desires coursing through his body? Had he been so obvious? Had every brief touch over the years given him away?

For the average man, acknowledging a desire for other men presented one challenge; for a survivor of paternal incest, transcending his nightmares to crave another man's touch presented a far greater one.

Logan had spent their freshman and sophomore years at UMass. attempting to analyze the duality of his feelings, trying to separate his love for Clay as a brother in arms from the lust that often assailed his system. He'd denigrated himself for craving the very acts that consumed his nightmares. He had done everything in his power not to give Clay even a hint of his conflicted feelings, and when Clay had dropped that little bomb, all he could think about was running away. A string of individually innocuous words had pulverized his entire being. So he'd taken his exams early, moved out of their apartment and joined the Rangers. All he could think about was getting as far away as fast as possible.

The last time he'd seen Clay had been at Mr. Shelby's funeral service. Logan spent the entire day covertly watching Clay from behind his sunglasses, but didn't have the guts to talk to the man. When Clay had tried to breach the gap, Logan made up lame excuses about needing to return to base right away. A base located nine states away, so naturally he couldn't make time for a coffee.

Logan knew Clay had every right to hate him, but every time he looked into those gray eyes, all he saw was love. The kind of love shared between two people who survived the hellish fires of their childhood together, and sympathetic love when Clay watched from the sidelines as Logan floundered in his new world. And it was love. Logan knew that. He wasn't so emotionally stunted and bitter that he confused Clay's support as pity. Logan had even detected a brief glimpse of what he'd expected passionate love to look like. However, that was most likely his fanciful imagination. He'd had a handful of lovers since fleeing Boston sixteen years ago, but not one of them had ever usurped Clay's position in his heart.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stretched, wincing as he felt his shoulder crack. He searched the floor for the cargo shorts he'd had on earlier and swiped them up off the hardwood floor. As he straightened, the world spun violently, and before he knew it, he was kissing the floor. He hated it when the vertigo kicked in. One minute he'd be fine and the next Logan found himself in the eye of a tornado. Cold sweats, nausea and vomiting typically followed. The worst part was he could never predict how long an episode would last. So far, in the last three months, he'd experienced everything from two minutes of sheer hell to two days.

Vibrations on the floorboards alerted him that Clay was on his way, and he saw big bare feet slide to a halt in front of his face. Clay's hand cupped his cheek, lifting his revolving gaze up. Since Logan couldn't focus, he couldn't read Clay's lips. He disjointedly raised his arm and kinda slapped his hand across Clay's mouth to keep him from speaking for a moment.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:06 pm

Using the nightstand as a focal point, he fixated on the lamp, and eventually, the vertigo ceased. When the room stopped its circus act, he looked up at Clay and saw the shock and concern on his face. He patted Clay's cheek, then scooted up, so he was sitting on the floor but leaning against the bed frame and mattress. He realized he was only wearing a pair of briefs and balled the shorts, which he'd somehow held onto in his lap.

"I'm okay," he said, slowly. At least this time, he wasn't heaving his guts all over the floor.

Logan watched Clay's lips and translated their movements.

"What happened?"

"Vertigo. Left over from the head injury. Only happens sometimes."

Clay took Logan's face between his hands. "You scared the living crap out of me. Don't do that again."

Logan smiled. "Sure."

They got themselves up off the floor, and Logan pulled on his shorts. He walked into the kitchen and got a glass of water. He drank, relishing the feel of a cool drip as it splashed on his bare chest.

When he opened his eyes, Clay fixed his gaze as sharply as any sniper on the bead as it slid down his chest; Logan hissed as the bead crossed his nipple, causing it to

harden. He watched Clay swallow convulsively, then turn his back and head for the sofa in the living area.

Logan set his glass back in the sink and, with a resigned sigh, walked into the living room. Clay sat on the sofa with a basket of partially folded laundry. The T-shirt in his hands, one of Logan's, was being twisted into a tightly coiled rope. He sank into the deep sofa. The leather cool on his back.

Clay tossed the shirt at him, and he put it on, stretching his torso and sliding the fabric down his stomach with far more languidness than necessary. He tightened his stomach and saw Clay's fingers turn white with tension out of the corner of his eye.

Interesting.

It appeared Clay wanted to either fuck him or kill him. Logan was voting for the first option. However, Clay's apparent attraction was confusing. What had happened to 'that which they could never have'?

Logan looked over at Clay, whose expression was now a mask of casualness, then picked up the notepad they used for complicated conversations. He turned sideways on the sofa so he could watch Clayton, trying to make himself comfortable.

"Do you need to see your doctor?" Clay asked.

Logan shook his head. Clay raised an eyebrow, signaling to Logan that he needed more information. His head dropped, and he let out a deep breath. A warm hand landed on his knee, and he looked up to see Clay's gray eyes filled with compassion.

"It's okay Logan. Take your time."

He squared his shoulders and looked Clay dead in the eyes, then scribbled on the

notepad. Damage to my inner ear, the part that controls your balance, causes the vertigo. My doctor said this would happen for a while. Only time and therapy will help. I've had the therapy.

Clay read Logan's note and nodded. He picked up his own pad and wrote. Is that what caused your hearing loss, too?

Logan shook his head. The fractures of my cochlea did that. Same area different structure.

Clay made sure he had Logan's attention before speaking, "Have you heard from the VA about those implant things? Didn't the hearing doctor say, you'd be a good candidate?"

Once again, Logan shook his head. "All they saying is 'case pending'."

"It's been three months!" Clay stood and paced back and forth along the couch. He stormed around the room, ranting and waving his arms around. Logan stared at Clay, not comprehending, but he thought there might have been something about three months in the beginning. Did he really think Logan didn't know how long it had been since his life was turned inside out?

Clay held up a hand. He picked up his notepad once again. I'm sorry. I know you didn't catch any of that. That was stupid of me. So what happened this morning? I mean, obviously, you had a flashback, but do you know what triggered it?

Logan once again shook his head.

"Have you had flashbacks before?"

He couldn't maintain eye contact as shame coursed through his body. He was a

thirty-six-year-old man. An Army Ranger. One of the baddest of the bad. Trained to chew nails and kill with a single glance. How could he possibly confess to an untold amount of lost time or instances when he traveled back to relive moments spent with his platoon—the grueling days in Ranger school, the nights drinking beer and playing cards, the first time he’d known he was directly responsible for another man’s death, or most often, that afternoon when the demons of hell unleashed themselves upon his unit. How could he possibly confess to being so weak, he frequently woke with tears tracking down his face?

Clay’s fingers locked with his, and Logan closed his eyes, letting the simple touch ground him in the present. The fingers squeezed, and Logan once again met Clay’s gaze.

“I know about the nightmares. I hear you at night. Sometimes, you scream just before you wake up.”

“It’s nothing. I’ll be fine.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:06 pm

“You’re not fine, Logan! This morning, something caused a flashback that made you freeze and curl into a little ball in the middle of a Chinatown bakery for close to twenty minutes. You never sleep, and when you do, your screams bleed through my walls. You hardly eat. You’ve probably lost twenty pounds in the two months since you came to live with me. You don’t talk to me anymore. I can barely get more than one-word responses out of you. You avoid me like the plague. I want to help you, but every time I try, you turn your back. Do you despise me so much that you’d rather live in pain than accept my help? Why Logan? We were the center of each other’s worlds for seven years, and now you can’t even stand to be in the same room as me. Do you really hate me that much?”

Logan saw the pain on Clay’s face and almost crumbled. He only understood about half of the rant because Clay was speaking too fast, but the gist was clear. Clay was hurt. Clay thought Logan hated him. The bond they’d always shared was stretched so thin the last thread was about to snap. And once again, it was all his fault.

His breath locked in his lungs, and his eyes watered. They were not tears; they weren’t. He did the only thing his fractured mind could think of. Launching across the sofa, he gathered Clay in his arms, holding him tight. Clay sat frozen for endless seconds before long arms snaked around Logan’s waist and squeezed his ribs to the point of near pain.

Clay’s body shook as Logan held him. Was Clay breaking apart the same as Logan? Had the stress cracks finally shattered, and Logan’s rock disintegrated? He relished the feel of Clay in his arms. Not in the lustful ways of his fantasies, but it was as if by holding each other, the strands of their bond once again wove together. Gradually, Clay’s trembles eased, and Logan’s lungs freed. He sat back but maintained contact

by grasping Clay's face between his hands. He stared into Clay's gray eyes, one of the few features that distinguished them from one another. During their teenage years together, many people had mistaken them for twins. They looked so similar. He and Clay had gotten a kick out of the misconception and rarely bothered to correct the error. They were brothers of the heart, regardless of their DNA.

"I don't hate you." Logan said the words slowly, trying to enunciate as properly as he could. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything."

Clay reached for Logan's hands and pulled them from his face, but refused to separate the link. "I don't need your apologies, Logan. You have every right to be angry and scared. I only want to help. Stop shutting me out."

He nodded his head. "Promise."

It was time to throw Clay a bone. He picked up his pen and notepad. The only way he would make this clear was to write it out. He didn't trust his voice right then.

Putting the tip of the pen to the paper, he started.

Talking is hard. Not emotionally. I mean, actually hard. I can't hear my voice anymore. I feel the vibrations in my throat, but my hearing loss prevents me from being able to monitor the sounds. I've spent hours practicing with mirrors. Trying to watch my lips and match them to the vibrations, but I can only do so much. I don't want to sound like an idiot when I talk. It's easier not to.

Clay read the note and frowned. He looked up at Logan, making sure the man could read his lips. "Okay. I understand now. I'm sorry I didn't think of that."

Clay picked up his notepad. I think the first thing we need to do is pay a visit to the VA and find out if you can get some hearing aids while we're waiting for the

approval of the implants. You won't be able to hear everything, but at least, they can give you more than what you have now. Second, I'm masking ... no I'm begging you to get some help with the PTSD. Something other than the drugs. I'll pay for you to see someone privately, if the VA won't offer the services or if you don't want to go there.

Logan shook his head. He scribbled on the notepad. I'll get help, but I'll pay. I have savings. You haven't asked me for any money since I came here. I've supported myself for sixteen years. I'm not helpless.

"I know that. I wasn't saying you were. I ... I only meant... Fuck! Why is this so hard? We used to practically read each other's thoughts, and now, I can't say more than five words without you misunderstanding me."

Logan was frustrated, too. He knew it would take time before his and Clay's bond healed completely, but he had to own up to when his defensiveness reared its ugly head.

"My fault." He scratched out a few more lines. We're never going to move on if we're constantly apologizing to each other. You're right, I need help. I'm thankful to you for offering, but I need to do this for myself. Will you call the VA and ask about the hearing aids? Maybe, I can get some loaners until they approve the implants. If they approve them.

Clay read the sharply slanting words, then looked up at Logan. "You never could write for shit," he said, smiling. He looked at his watch. "It's two o'clock. Let me call them now and see what I can find out."

Logan watched as Clay walked over to the kitchen island where his laptop and the phone sat. A few keystrokes on the computer and the phone was in his hand.

Now that the emotional turmoil had eased, Logan once again looked at Clay with

fresh eyes. Logan's gaze fell upon Clay's long, tapered fingers, which fidgeted when Clay was bored or stressed. He'd always wondered what those fingers would feel like sliding down his body or buried deep inside him. Hair black as midnight flowed over Clay's head, and Logan longed to run his fingers through it to see if it was as soft as it appeared. Logan knew Clay's chest and stomach rippled with muscle. He'd glimpsed the washboard abs the other day when Clay had come back from a run and had wiped the sweat from his face with the edge of his T-shirt. Finally, Logan's gaze settled on his favorite feature of Clay's anatomy. The perfect, round ass which topped a set of long legs. The very ass that was currently sticking out as Clay leaned against the island, determined to test Logan's resolve.

He bit his lip to stop a groan. Of course, right at that moment, Clay turned around and caught his expression. A concerned look crossed Clay's face, and Logan pasted on a smile while pulling a pillow into his lap. Beneath the plush barrier, he thumped his cock to get the wayward erection to subside before Clay realized what was happening. He tilted his head back, and his eyes caught the play of sunlight across the crystals of the chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

The elaborate antique bronze with four candle-like pillars was more detailed and elaborate than Logan would have thought Clay had chosen. For all he knew, it came with the place. He had to admit it looked good with the other traditional details of the apartment. The metal finish of the chandelier almost matched the fireplace surround.

He felt a little ashamed that he'd never complimented Clay on his home or ask why he'd chosen this place instead of something more contemporary. Boston was teeming with apartments. What was it about this one that had called to Clay? Logan liked it. Traditional yet comfortable. It had all the modern amenities but touches of the old world. It felt as though they had claimed their own little corner of the history exploding from the pores of this city.

Clay disrupted his thoughts when he sat on the ottoman directly in front of him.

“You have an appointment tomorrow at eleven o’clock. The audiologist had a cancellation and apologized that you were never told to come in before now. She said it’s standard procedure to be fit with traditional hearing aids while awaiting approval. They’ll have to take impressions of your ears to make the custom fit pieces, then in about two weeks you’ll get the aids.”

Logan smiled. It looked as if things may be on the right track. “Thank you.”

Clay knelt on the floor in front of Logan. “I did my part. Now, you have to do yours.”

He nodded. Determined, he wouldn't fail Clay again. He would get the help he needed and, maybe, along the way, find the courage to come forward with the feelings consuming him.

Chapter Four

Logan stood outside the line of brownstones in Back Bay. Inside was a man who reportedly could help him. He’d done careful research, asking online groups and searching for medical credentials to find the right person for the task ahead. While getting a handle on the PTSD was ostensibly why he was here, he specifically sought a healthcare professional reported to be gay friendly. Dr. Lincoln, a trained psychiatrist specializing in trauma recovery, was openly gay and frequently received referrals from the Boston LGBTQIA community.

A car alarm went off a few spaces down, and Logan jumped. He was still getting used to hearing those sounds again. The hearing aids he’d been fit with at the VA only a few days ago had opened up his world, but certain sounds were jarring after living in a muted world for so long.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:06 pm

He jogged up the steps and saw the brass plaque beside the door with a list of businesses confirming he had the right location. Apparently, the businesses each had a floor to themselves. He stepped into the foyer. Dr. Lincoln's office occupied the first floor; a similar brass plate marked the door to his left.

He placed his hand on the knob and turned, peeking his head around the corner of the door. The first thing he saw was a young woman sitting behind an antique writing desk situated in front of the bank of windows that faced the street.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

Logan straightened to his full height and entered the room as confidently as possible. “My name is Logan Callen. I have an appointment with Dr. Lincoln.”

“Yes, Sir. I see you’re a new patient.” She picked up a clipboard with some papers attached. “Can you please fill out these forms? Dr. Lincoln will be with you shortly.”

He accepted the clipboard from her outstretched hand and turned to see two club chairs and a love seat in a sitting area on the opposite side of the room. Beyond the receptionist's desk, stood a solid wood wall. Logan glanced around, searching for a door that led to Dr. Lincoln’s office was since this was obviously only a reception area. He sat in the chair and looked at the forms he was required to complete. The questions pertained to basic demographic information until he reached a section of open-ended questions about family and home life, work, neighbors, and several spaces left blank, asking him to describe his current problem.

Like that’s only going to fill up three lines.

He answered as best he could and returned the forms to the receptionist.

“Thank you, Mr. Callen. I’ll be right back.”

She walked past him and slid one panel of the wooden barricade to the side, exiting further into the office. Logan felt stupid that he hadn’t realized the barrier was, in fact, a sliding wall. He chalked that up to nerves.

Left to his own devices, he paced until the nervous energy annoyed him, then forced himself to choose a spot amongst the offered seating. Logan lifted the strap of his satchel over his head and sat in one of the club chairs. He picked up a magazine and idly thumbed through the latest Hollywood exploits, chuckling as he read about the latest scandal. He would think people had better things to do than worry about spoiled celebrities. Then again, he was reading it just like everyone else in the country. He heard the receptionist’s voice to his left, smiling at the realization that he actually heard her.

When he walked through the opening in the wall, he came face to face with the man he presumed to be Dr. Lincoln. The man had a commanding presence. He matched all of Logan’s six-foot-three-inch height and exceeded him by a couple more. His torso rippled and bulged with muscle. The man would have been terrifying to those of more timid natures had it not been for his relaxed posture and the kindness in his eyes. He was younger than Logan had expected. Late thirties, early forties maybe?

“Mr. Callen. Nice to meet you. I’m Dr. Lincoln. You’re welcome to call me Matt. I don’t want you tripping over my title when we talk.”

Logan held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, too. Thank you for seeing me.”

“While I appreciate the acknowledgement, thank yourself for having the courage to make an appointment. Please make yourself comfortable.” Matt gestured to the sitting

area around the fireplace. “I know how hard it is to take this first step, and I’m glad you’re here.”

Logan nodded his head. He looked around the office, which looked more like a study. Leather-bound tomes and decorative embellishments filled the hunter green walls and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. One wall held several framed degree certificates. Logan saw two heavily draped windows. He supposed the doctor didn’t want his patients’ minds to wander beyond the guided discussions. Logan sat in one of the traditional leather club chairs and waited for Dr. Lincoln to join him. He took out his iPad and, while waiting for it to power up, continued to scan the room.

Table and floor lamps transformed what could have been an oppressive cave into an inviting space. A large executive desk of rich, dark wood dominated the space, complemented by a high-backed leather chair. He could picture some old English Lord sitting behind it with a highball, looking over the week’s correspondence. Logan shook his head at the fanciful notion.

His tablet was ready, and Logan opened the live captioning app the audiologist had shown him. Like the captions on the TV, words appeared on the screen during conversations. Logan thought the idea was genius and, that day, had gone out and bought the best iPad he could find. Between the conversation app and the one the audiologist put on his phone for call transcriptions, Logan felt like he’d regained some measure of his life back. When he’d emailed the doctor asking for an appointment, he’d explained his problem, and Dr. Lincoln had been very accommodating with Logan's need for the assistive device.

Matt settled down in the chair across from Logan. “Mr. Callen, may I call you Logan?”

Logan glanced down and smiled when the words appeared on the screen. “Please do. Thank you for letting me use the tablet during our session. I know it slows the

conversation a bit.”

“Absolutely. Logan, let me tell you how I plan to conduct our sessions. For the first few minutes, I’d like to get to know you better. Find out what things you enjoy doing, where you’re at in your life and where you want to go. Then we can delve into what brought you here, seeking help.” Logan looked up at Matt and nodded.

"I can see that you wear hearing aids. Do they provide clarity or are you dependent on the captions?"

"They help me hear some sounds, but the injury to my inner ear destroyed my speech understanding. In order for me to understand you by voice only, I have to see your face and you need to speak slowly. It is possible, but difficult. My last test showed that I only discriminate thirty percent of words accurately. And that's with the hearing aids."

“Thank you. I will remember that. Tell me a little about yourself.”

“What do you want to know?”

"How about you begin by sharing something about yourself that isn't well known?"

Logan fidgeted for a few seconds, trying to think of something deep and significant. When he couldn’t think of something on par with obtaining world peace, he said, “I like to watch B rated horror movies late at night, while eating a bowl of Ben and Jerry’s Phish Food.”

Matt chuckled. “I prefer Cherry Garcia and Gene Kelly movies.”

"Gene Kelly earned his reputation, but I've always thought people overlooked Van Johnson's talent."

“Remind me what he played in. I know the name, but can’t recall what he did.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“He's got hundreds of credits to his name. But probably best known for his work in the 40s and 50s. He starred in movies like *Eagles Over London* and *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*. He played opposite Kelly in *Brigadoon*. You remember the sidekick who masked his emotionality with dry witted sarcasm? I figured that would be right up your alley," he said, smiling.

Logan was relaxing. Settling into the chair, he felt the tension release from his back and neck muscles. This wasn't so hard. It was just two guys talking. He'd done this thousands of times, millions of times.

Matt grinned. “Yes, well, who likes to bring the office home with them?”

And just like that, the tension returned.

“Sometimes the office follows you home, whether or not you want it there.”

“Are you speaking of the hearing loss or the PTSD?”

Logan guessed the time for avoidance had ended. The casual conversation had lulled him into a false sense of security, but now, Dr. Lincoln would force him to face his demons. Logan's former commander could learn a thing or two from the esteemed psychiatrist.

“Either, both. I'm not really sure.”

“Tell me about the hearing loss first.”

This he could do. He geared up to give his spiel. “I explained on my paperwork that I am an Army Ranger, or I was anyway. The hearing loss is a result of a head injury, from an explosion while I was on deployment, which caused transverse fractures to my temporal bones. The fractures damaged my cochleae, and left me with a severe sensorineural hearing loss, bilaterally.”

There was no immediate text appearing on Logan’s screen so he looked up at Matt.

“How many times have you given that explanation?” Matt said, sitting back in his chair.

Logan grinned. “A few.”

He saw Matt nod. “Now tell me more about this change. How has this affected your life?”

“It was as if someone flipped a switch, and while I could still see, all the sounds I used to take for granted were gone. I refused to talk because I couldn’t monitor my voice. I would get violently dizzy at a moment’s notice. I’ve only started voicing again in the last week or so. That may be why I sound a little rusty.” Logan shrugged. “But if you can’t understand me, that’s your problem, not mine.”

“That you now advocate for your communication needs is a big step. I’m glad to see you’re taking initiative and striving to improve your situation. However, you just told me what happened. I asked, how did it make you feel?”

Logan thought about what Matt was asking. He’d recited what had happened in medical terms, he’d explained how it changed his day-to-day living, but now how did all this make him feel? “The day I woke up from the coma was the scariest day of my life. I randomly migrate between hate and despair. Some days, I want to lash out at everyone and everything, and others, I want to curl up in a little ball and never leave

the bed. My medicine cabinet would make a junkie cream their pants, and if I skip a dose of one of those tiny colored pills, it feels like I'm on a violent mental rollercoaster."

"Good."

"Good? How is this good? I've been behaving like some psychotic."

"I said good because these emotions are appropriate and real. If you'd said the hearing loss and repercussions hadn't affected you one bit, then I would be worried. We'll continue to work through your confusions as we progress. As for the medications, I'm going to review your list and dosages. We don't want to take you off the pills, but maybe we can find a better balance. Did the event that caused your hearing loss also force your discharge from the Rangers?"

"Yes. A day after I woke up, a one star visited me in the hospital. Handed me a piece of paper that said thank you for my service to the country, and informed me I would go home as soon as I was stable. He saluted me, then turned and walked away. I guess that was the Army's version of a polite kiss off."

"That had to be difficult. How long were you in the service?"

"Fifteen years. I joined when we were twenty. Gave them gallons of my sweat, quarts of my blood, and even shed a few tears when nobody was looking. But the second it became known that I was part of the dent and ding stock, they shipped me back, return to sender."

"You said 'when we were twenty'. Whose we?"

"Clay and I. He's my roommate, foster brother and best friend. When I enlisted, we had just finished our sophomore year at UMass."

“Did Clay enlist as well?”

“No, Clay stayed in school. I left.”

Logan wondered if Matt could detect the hesitance and tension with that last comment. He wasn't sure if his voice inflections were the same as before he lost his hearing. Logan had hoped they could avoid the topic of his and Clay's relationship for a little longer.

“Let's switch gears a little and talk about the PTSD. What symptoms do you have or events have you experienced?”

“They told me the PTSD was normal after surviving the attack. I don't feel very normal most of the time. I have nightmares almost nightly and flashbacks. A few weeks ago I ... I had one while running errands. They called the cops on me.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“That must have been scary. How did the police react?”

"Clay came. I guess they called him? He's a detective in Southie. I never asked how he found out. The cops were okay. Nobody hassled me or got aggressive. The shop owner was pissed as hell."

"I'm glad to hear the situation didn't escalate. PTSD is common in survivors of trauma, but symptoms vary, and everyone struggles to get a handle on their disorder in different ways. So when you say you don't feel normal, I would advise that 'normal' is a relative term. Has your best friend been supportive as you've transitioned back to being a civilian?"

“We live together.”

“That doesn't answer the question.”

Had Clay been supportive? The man had dropped everything with a phone call from one of Logan's platoon members, driven to Georgia to pick him up and brought him home with nothing more demanding than a hug. Clay had let Logan infiltrate his home. He'd financially supported Logan for three months without question, with hardly more than a handful of stunted conversations between them. Clay was the best of them. The stronger one. The one who'd had the guts to be honest about his sexuality all those years ago. While Logan had freaked out, run away and joined the frickin' Army rather than admit to having the same desires. It wasn't Clay's fault that Logan had these feelings, and yet, Logan's actions for the past months had inadvertently been punishing Clay. All Clay had wanted was for him to be healthy and happy. All Logan wanted was Clay.

Matt waved his hand to get Logan's attention. "Are you living with Clay because you want to or because you need to?"

This was one of the hardest questions Logan had ever been asked. Was he ready to talk about the complexities of his and Clay's relationship? He'd only known this man for forty-five minutes. Could Logan trust him with one of his deepest secrets? He took a deep breath and reminded himself this was why he was here. Well, one of the reasons.

"I live with Clay because I want to and I need to."

He looked up at Matt, then back down at the screen. Nothing appeared, and Matt just watched him. The silence stretched. Unable to look the man in the eyes, he turned to gaze at the wall of books. He cataloged the different colors of the spines in his mind.

After several seconds, he opened his mouth and closed it several times. Up to that point he hadn't watched the screen when he talked, but now Logan looked down and watched the words appear on the screen, needing the separation from Matt's too knowing gaze and validation that what he was about to say was accurate. "Clay and I have always been inseparable. Well, we were until I messed up sixteen years ago. We were twenty when Clay came out to me. I panicked. Finished my exams for the semester, moved out of our apartment and enlisted in the Army in the space of one day. I had to get as far away from him as I could as fast as I could."

"Why? Do you not approve of his lifestyle?"

He shook his head vehemently. "That's not it. Clay being gay doesn't matter to me. No, that's not right. It does matter. It matters too much."

Matt waited until Logan met his gaze. He spoke very distinctly and very slowly. "Why does it matter too much, Logan?"

"Because I'm gay, too, and I'm in love with the man I turned my back on when he needed me most."

Chapter Five

Clay shut down his computer in his office and bolted from the station when the clock signaled the end of his shift. He prayed no one would call him with some fresh case that night. Today was Logan's first session with the psychiatrist. Clay didn't know who Logan had picked. He wanted that decision to be Logan's and Logan's alone. Logan had been right. This part of his recovery had to be done for and by himself. Clay would provide whatever support Logan needed, but he would try not to interrogate him about the therapy.

He was sure today would be especially hard for Logan, since it marked the first time he would open the metaphorical can of worms. Clay wanted to have dinner waiting and give Logan an evening where he didn't have to think. Clay would take care of him, and if Logan wanted to talk, great, but he wouldn't push.

He pulled up the food ordering app that supported local restaurants and selected his and Logan's favorite menu items. With a few taps, he placed the dinner order. Clay's pickup time wasn't for another thirty minutes.

"Damn, should have put the order in sooner."

"Are you talking to yourself again, Phillips?"

Clay looked across the desk at his partner. "Maybe. It's not really a problem unless I hear a voice talk back, right?"

"Hell, I'd probably still keep you on as a partner. Maybe with two of you, we'd close more cases."

Tim Grant made it his life's mission to take as many offenders off the street as possible. He'd been on the force for over a decade. For six years he served as a training officer, mentoring the next generation of cops, then two years ago took the detective exam. Clay considered himself fortunate to have been assigned a partner with legendary street skills and investigative intuition.

"How are things going at home?"

After Logan's flashback incident, Clay had spent a fair bit of time talking to Tim about Logan's struggles. The man had lost his brother to mental health struggles after service, so he could listen with an empathic ear and counsel from a place of understanding. Clay hadn't told Tim everything about his and Logan's past, but he'd given enough high-level details that his partner knew the basics.

Clay wiggled his hand back and forth. "Better? I think. Logan has his first appointment with the psychiatrist today. I was just putting in our dinner order, so when I get home we can just decompress and not have to worry about making dinner or doing dishes."

"That's good. Have you given any more thought to talking to someone yourself?"

Clay shrugged. "I'm fine."

Tim raised his eyebrow.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

"Okay. I'm better. Now that Logan has the hearing aids, and we learned about those captioning apps, it's made a world of difference. We're actually communicating at home."

"That's great, but it's not like the stress and anxiety you've lived with over the last several months just evaporates. You've been so focused on Logan and his needs—" Clay opened his mouth and Tim held up his hand. "I'm not saying you shouldn't have been. He's needed you, but you have needs too. And if you continue to ignore them or push them down far enough, eventually they're going to spring up like a jack-in-the-box and explode all over your life. Don't make yourself collateral damage."

Clay understood what Tim was saying. He wasn't unaware of his elevated blood pressure or insomnia issues, but compared to Logan's daily struggles to survive that they seemed inconsequential.

"Have I let it affect my performance? Do you still trust me to have your back?"

Tim crossed his arms and frowned. "Here I was saying we needed two of you, but with questions like that, I now wonder if I need to tell the lieutenant I have questions about your intelligence."

Clay rolled his eyes.

"You know if you do that often enough, they'll get stuck to the back of your head."

"Pretty sure that's not true."

"Pretty sure you're a dumbass. Clay, you put in more hours and have cleared more cases than any other detective with the same time in grade. And do I trust you to have my back? Really asshole?"

Clay held up his hands. "Okay. Okay. I'm sorry. My inner bitch escaped for a minute. I'll get her under control."

Tim shrugged. "Eh, she is fun to go drinking with. Speaking of drinks, would you and Logan like to get together with me and Sam?"

"I don't know..."

"Not at a bar or loud place. I was thinking about just cocktails and dinner at our place. It's important for those with PTSD to avoid slipping into isolated behaviors. Logan needs a support network of more than one."

"Let's see how things go with his therapy and we'll talk about it." Clay looked at his watch. "Speaking of which, I need to go pick up dinner and get home."

"Okay. I hope it went well, but call me if you need someone to talk to tonight. I mean it."

Clay stood and gave Tim a back slapping hug. "I know you do, and I appreciate it."

"You're more than my partner, Clay. Sam and I ... we consider you part of the family."

It wasn't long after they'd started working together that Clay confessed his experience growing up in the foster system to Tim. Since then, Tim and his wife had made a concerted effort to enfold Clay into their inner circle. The pair didn't have kids, so they dedicated their time to their dogs and experiencing all life offered. That

somehow included adopting Clay.

"I know, and thank you. Truly."

Tim nodded. "Now, go home to your man."

Clay exited the station and the noise of the city faded as he walked toward the parking lot; it wasn't until parked cars surrounded him that the weight of Tim's words about Logan hit him. His man? Did he think Clay and Logan were a couple? Had Clay's secret feelings for Logan unintentionally leaked through in his words, giving the impression that something more was there? He knew he would need to watch his words carefully from that point on, mindful of the subtle nuances and potential consequences of every utterance. He didn't want anyone to think he and Logan were anything more than friends; the mere suggestion sent a shiver of panic down his spine. Especially if he and Logan did more together outside the apartment.

An hour later, Clay balanced the bag of take away in one hand and, in the other, a six-pack of long necks while slipping his key into the lock of their apartment door. The door swung open, and there stood Logan with a small grin on his face.

"Uh, hi. I brought dinner from Lincoln Tavern."

Logan took the bag of food and carried it to the kitchen. "This smells amazing." He turned on the iPad and opened the transcription app. "What did you get me?"

"The wood grilled bar steak. I got the lobster fettuccine. That way we have surf and turf."

"Can we split it up?"

They used to do that all the time in college. Clay would order one thing off a menu

and Logan another, then the two of them would eat off each other's plates. Of course, back then they dined either in the cafeteria or off a fast food dollar menu.

Clay smiled. "Yeah. Help yourself."

Logan looked calm, but Clay saw the stress of the session lingering in his eyes. They dished up the food and Clay grabbed two beers. He held one up to Logan.

Logan took the beer. "Thanks. I'm starving and thirsty. I guess talking is more strenuous than I expected."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Clay looked deep into Logan's blue eyes. The few simple words spoken aloud between them meant more than he could have imagined, especially now that he knew how hard it was for Logan. He tried to assess if Logan wanted to say something further or was going to leave the topic of his therapy alone.

Logan walked around the edge of the island and stood behind Clay. "Clay?" He placed a hand on Clay's shoulder. "It's okay. You can ask."

Clay fiddled with the foil edging over the clear plastic lid of the carryout containers. Just what questions was he supposed to ask? Was Logan permitting him to question his therapy session, or was it time to ask harder questions about their friendship? It had to be the therapy thing, right? If Clay were talking with a boyfriend, he'd have felt justified. The emotional wellbeing of a partner would have a direct effect on their relationship, but he and Logan weren't a couple. They could never share in that kind of relationship.

Aside from the fact that Logan was straight, he'd been so traumatized by his father that accepting any kind of caring from another man was difficult. Clay counted his blessings that he and Logan had become as close as they had when they were teenagers. He knew the statistics. He saw the result of child abuse daily. Had Logan formed any close friendships while in the service? Was there a best friend somewhere desperate to know if Logan was okay, just as Clay had for all those years? Or had Logan existed as an isolated entity in a great war machine? Several of Clay's co-workers were former military, and they often talked about the brotherhood of their respective branches. Maybe Logan had replaced Clay? Maybe Clay was being selfish by keeping Logan here? Clay wasn't strong enough to ask those questions yet.

Logan was a stronger man than Clay could ever hope to become. He knew his feelings for Logan would never change, but he'd made a vow years ago to never cross that line. He'd told himself that it was his job was to help Logan heal. Help him transition to this new stage of his life. Support him as he worked to overcome the demons that plagued his dreams. Clay didn't think he had it in him to ask the harder questions tonight. He supposed he could stick with the 'how was your day?' topic, even if that was a bit of a minefield.

But Logan said it was all right...

Clay turned, his body almost brushing against Logan's. The man stood so close. His hands longed to wrap themselves around Logan's waist. Instead, he shoved them in the pockets of his slacks and asked, "How did it go?"

"It was hard. Harder than I expected, but I think I chose the right doctor. I think he can help. Eventually."

"Good. If you want to tell me anything, I'll listen, but I won't pry. I won't push you."

Logan smiled. "I know."

Clay sucked in a breath as Logan reached out for the counter, temporarily caging him between his arms. Seconds passed, and Clay would have sworn Logan's body leaned closer toward him. He closed his eyes briefly to savor the illicit closeness, but they flew open when the heat from Logan's body evaporated. He watched as Logan carried his plate and a beer, which had been sitting on the counter behind him, into the living room. Clay heard the TV click on and the opening theme song for their favorite show, sing out from the speakers of the flat screen. He tried to calm his racing heart with a deep breath, and when that didn't work, he slugged back several large gulps of beer. He'd intended for this night to be one of leisure, but he was anything but relaxed.

Late that night, Clay lay in bed, tension rolling through him. Logan had seemed to appreciate the effort Clay had made that evening, but he couldn't stop thinking about that moment in the kitchen when their bodies had brushed. He couldn't explain why that moment differed from thousands they'd shared over their lifetime. He and Logan had always horsed around as kids. Mock wrestling fights had frequently smashed their bodies together. Even after he'd discovered his attraction to Logan, he'd never felt the sexual tension they'd shared only hours ago. Why was tonight different?

Clay wrapped his hand around his cock. Languidly, he stroked it as it hardened. He knew a good orgasm would eradicate the tension in his body and tried to picture his last boyfriend. Light brown hair and green eyes had topped a lean swimmer's body.

Clay's cock was fully hard now. Reaching into his bedside drawer, he removed the bottle of lube. A little slick would help the cause. After squeezing out some of the cool liquid, he took himself in hand once again.

Keeping the image of J.D. in his mind, he stroked up and down. As he drifted further into the fantasy, instead of imagining his tongue licking down the flat planes of J.D.'s stomach, it traced the ridges of a well-muscled abdomen. Instead of a pair of long, thin arms wrapped around his neck, a pair of powerful hands clutched at his back. His hand sped up, and he groaned as his thumb swiped over the leaking head of his cock.

Clay lifted his hips into his fist as he imagined thrusting into the tightest, most welcoming ass he could ever imagine. His eyes remained tightly closed as he chased the explosion just beyond the bend. In his imagination, he ran his hands up and down the muscular body beneath him. Thick arms and legs wrapped around him as they twisted on the sheets.

His opponent flipped him with a move too swift to counter, and as his eyes traveled up the torso of the man now riding him, he gasped. He'd only seen the same small birthmark above the left pec on one man. His eyes flew up to the face of his lover.

Instead of J.D.'s green gaze staring down at him, it was a pair of laser blue orbs that captured him. The challenge was evident, the dare to succumb to his long denied passions swimming in their fiery depths, but it was the love broadcasting from every pore of Logan's body that sent Clay over the edge.

His cock erupted, and he tried to temper the cry of Logan's name as he climaxed. Wave after wave of elation swamped him. Finally, after years of denial and avoidance, he experienced pleasure with the man of his dreams.

When the euphoria faded, he came crashing down as he realized that the man would forever remain tucked away in the far corners of his mind. He knew now, as he knew then, that the one thing he and Logan could never share was a passionate love. He drifted to sleep, both hoping and fearing that more visions of the man he loved filled his dreams.

Chapter Six

"Today, I'd like to explore the impact of your childhood and how it shaped your view of relationships, both romantic and casual."

Logan stared at the tablet stationed behind Matt's chair that captioned their words. After the first few sessions, they'd come up with a system so that Logan could read the text and look Matt in the eye. It helped foster a more cohesive dialogue between them while still adapting to Logan's communication needs. His eyes scanned the words again, his heart racing like a drum solo, a cold sweat slicking his brow as he confirmed his initial understanding.

He slid his hands up and down his thighs. "I guess there's not really an option to say 'no', right?"

"You always have a choice, Logan. It's never my intent to remove your autonomy in

these sessions."

"But then I'm not maximizing this opportunity to heal."

Matt didn't speak, but his facial expression said enough. Logan inhaled and exhaled slowly. "Okay. Where do you want to start?"

"You've shared about your experience of transitioning into the foster care system and the day you met Clay."

Logan smiled. Not at the memory of those early days, but at the tiny flashback in his mind of the first time he'd met Clay's gray gaze, and the teen had smiled at him.

"But let's take a step back and talk about why you entered the system."

"You mean the sexual, emotional, or physical abuse?"

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

"Forget the adult terms for a moment; paint a picture of your childhood—what did it look like, feel like, smell like, sound like?"

"I can't remember the first time he hit me. The bruises were always just ... there. If they faded and my flesh became less tender, it almost felt as though something was missing. The sound of screams through the walls would bleed into my dreams. The stench of rum still makes me gag. I've tried for years to forget the sound of his voice, and sometimes I think I've succeeded, but the words are branded into my brain."

"What words?"

"Cocksucker. Faggot. Retard. Worthless. One of his favorite phrases was 'out of my entire load I shot that night, I can't believe you were the one that landed.'"

"And your mother? What was her response when your father would use those words?"

"She had a Guinness Book level of selective hearing. When he acted human, she'd praise him for how loving and involved he was in our everyday lives, but when he'd spiral out of control, she put blinders on and disappear into a bottle. I know now that he had mental health issues, but as a child I didn't understand why one minute my father would hug me and the next I'd be ducking and dodging the baseball bat he kept in the closet."

"Of course you didn't. Having to navigate his mood swings must have been exhausting. Did you ever confide in a friend at school or teacher about what was happening at home?"

Logan scoffed. "Sure. Then I got sent to the principal's office for spreading lies about such a great man. A pillar of the community. I was acting out, seeking attention, jealous of his popularity because I was a reclusive kid with no friends. The first time DFC was called, I was seven. I'd been squirming in my seat at school because a scab on my back itched like crazy and the teacher caught sight of a bruise. They'd shown up at the house and it was a good day. He explained away the bruises as boyhood clumsiness. My mom played the Stepford Wife and even sprinkled in a few tears, admonishing the nosy educator when clearly I had two loving parents at home. That ... that night he... he said if I wasn't smart enough to figure out how to hide the bruises on the outside, then he'd just have to put them on the inside. I didn't know what he meant. Until I did."

"That's when the sexual abuse started?"

"Not immediately. In fact, we went through months where nothing happened. He didn't yell. He didn't hit either one of us. He'd go to work every morning and be at the dinner table every night. I still don't know if the change in his behavior was a tactic to lull us into a false sense of security or if he really got better for a while. But while he seemed to stabilize, my mom lost herself."

"What do you mean?"

Logan got up and paced Matt's office. "She'd always walked this line between loving and distant. But after DFC came to the house and nothing came of the visit, she crossed it completely. The casual motherly touches stopped. She never looked me in the eye anymore."

Logan tried to recall his mother's face, but she'd become this ghost. A wispy image without form in the recesses of his mind. He thought she used a coconut scented body wash and somekind of flowery shampoo, but even that could be something he made up over the years when he'd still tried to fill the gaps after she left him. He heard

some low pitch mumbling and realized Matt was talking. Logan turned and glanced at the tablet to catch up on the conversation.

"Sorry, can you say that again?"

"I asked if you think the change in her behavior was driven by guilt."

Logan shrugged. "Guilt or apathy. Couldn't tell you which. I remember the last time she said the words 'I love you'." Matt gestured for him to continue and Logan sat back in the chair. "I was about to leave the house to get on the bus for school, and she hugged me as I went to open the door. I stiffened. It was so out of character at that point, I didn't know how to respond. She just said the words, then pushed me out the door. I went through the school day in an almost zombie-like awareness."

"What happened when you got home from school? Was she still affectionate or had she retreated again?"

"She was dead. I found her in a blood filled bathtub. The kitchen knife laid on the tiled floor. I picked it up and kept looking down at the knife and back at her. I leaned over the tub, and that's when my father walked in."

"I'm sorry, Logan. That's the kind of traumatic experience that shapes a young mind for the rest of their life."

"At least she escaped him. When she was there, even when she wasn't really present, she provided a ... I don't know how to explain it. Energy in the house. After she was gone, there was just the two of us, and he ... that's when it started."

"The rapes?"

Logan nodded. "It started out as him forcing himself into my mouth, but eventually

... he would hold me down and, well, let's just say he made his promise come true. I bruised and bled on the inside more than the outside going forward."

"How did it come to an end?"

"I was twelve. It had been happening for four years, and one night I responded."

"In what way? Did you fight back?"

Logan shook his head. "I got hard. I mean, it had been happening spontaneously for a while, but that was the first time it happened because of stimulation. I snuck a hand down there and he lost his shit. He pulled out so fast that it startled me and before I could blink, his fist slammed into my face. He broke my cheekbone, two ribs, and my right arm that night. I wasn't supposed to have pleasure from what he did. He was delivering punishment. When he stopped, I heard him say 'Well shit'. I couldn't actually see him because my eyes had swelled shut, but he dragged me out of bed, threw me in the car and dumped me at the entrance to the ER."

"That's when they placed you in foster care?"

"Never saw him again."

"And when you met Clay?"

"Eventually. Spent some time in a children's facility because I was pretty fucked up. Had some trust issues." He smiled. "This isn't my first stint in therapy. Spent a couple of years talking and not talking about my feelings. With the help of the staff psychiatrist, I got to a point where they deemed me stable enough to be placed in a foster home. That's where I met Clay."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Matt held out a box of tissues and Logan lifted his hand to find his cheeks wet. He hadn't even realized he'd been crying as he described his childhood. He took the tissue and stepped away to dry his eyes and blow his nose. Thankfully, Matt was silent while Logan collected himself. He turned back toward the chair and found a bottle of water waiting for him. He uncapped the bottle and took a long drink.

"I'm good."

"We've unpacked a lot today. There's still time in our session. Do you want to keep going, or have you reached your limit."

"Honestly, I know that what I shared was new to you, but like I said, I've been down this part of the journey before. My childhood was a nightmare. There's no way around that, but I came to you because I need help with the PTSD from my time in the service and frankly needed an objective ear and mind to talk out my feelings about Clay and what to do."

"Okay then. Tell me about your first positive sexual experience."

"I don't even remember his name. I'd run from Clay into the arms of the Army. I'd made it through basic and advanced training. One of my sergeants put the bug in my ear that I should apply for Ranger school. In order to do that, you have to survive RASP."

"What's that?"

"Ranger Assessment and Selection Program. Eight weeks of mental and physical tests

to see if you have the fortitude to make the grade. It was adrenaline fueled torture, and I loved every second. Then the real fun began. Over the sixty days of Ranger School the Army takes you over mountains and deep into swamps. Our motto is Rangers lead the way, and that is what they teach you. We trained our bodies and minds to endure and overcome any obstacle we might face. Anyway, it was the night of graduation and I went out with some of the other candidates. I caught the eye of this guy across the bar and we did the whole 'are you interested' dance."

"So by that time you were comfortable in saying you're gay? What had changed from the time you left Clay until then?"

"Do you know how many times I've asked myself that same question? I haven't figured out an answer yet. All I know is that when Clay came out to me, I panicked. Everything I said to him that day made it seem like I was disgusted about him wanting to have sex with another guy. I know that. However, despite all the shit my father put me through, I still craved a man's touch, and that ... god that fucked me up good for a long time. When I saw that guy across the bar, I think I finally had reached a point where I jumped into the deep end to see what happened. Either I'd get over my hangups and become a functional sexual being or I'd put my dick away and get on with my life."

"I take it things went well?"

Logan smiled. "I still use my dick. In fact, I went through a period when I kind of became one too. I'd fuck any guy interested, then walk away. I was up front with them. Never made promises that what we'd have would be anything more than a one nighter, but it wasn't until I hooked up with Adams several years later I allowed myself to form a connection with a guy beyond a physical one."

"Adams was your teammate. The one killed in action?"

"He was my best friend that I occasionally slept with. We formed a weird symbiotic bond where he stood in for who I really wanted and vice versa." Logan smirked. "I'm sure as a licensed mental health professional there's a bit of drool leaking out, wanting to dice me up and analyze my brain for those choices."

"I leave the dicing to the surgeons and psychopaths. We all make choices that, upon later reflection, seem ... questionable or unhealthy. However, sometimes those same choices open doors that lead to tremendous personal growth. How did your relationship with Adam's change you?"

"He encouraged, oh fuck it, he forced me to face my feelings for Clay. He talked about this guy back home that he really liked but was a total homebody. Adams had left for basic training and broken things off because he knew there was no way the man would follow him, but always regretted it. I told him about how I regretted running away, and making Clay think I hated him for all those years. One night, we made a pact to fix our wrongs. Ten hours later, I had his brains on my blouse and my world became silent, except for this incessant ringing."

"So here we are. You're mourning your friend, grieving the loss of your hearing, and navigating how to rebuild a friendship."

"Should keep you in top shelf whiskey for a while, right?"

"I'm more of a pinot noir man."

"To-ma-to. To-mah-do. Think you can fix me?"

"I don't fix people. I help people fix themselves. This is going to be messy and often painful. I'll force you to be honest and we'll dig deep into some scared over wounds. You'll probably hate me at times, but ultimately, the work you put in will help you heal."

"Challenge accepted, doc."

Chapter Seven

The fall leaves crunched underfoot as Logan walked towards the T station from Matt's office. In the three months since he began therapy, his life had transformed. With Matt's help, he now had a much better handle on the PTSD. Case in point, his ability to get around Boston alone without paralyzing fear. His anxiety still spiked occasionally, and nightmares lingered, but less frequently. The grounding techniques Matt had taught him provided a way for Logan to stabilize panic attacks before they got out of control. The flashbacks happened so quickly that he couldn't prevent them, but he hadn't had one—as intense as in the bakery—in two months.

Through their discussions, he'd determined that the most common trigger for the flashbacks was seeing people around him that reminded him of former platoon members. They'd talked a lot more about Adams than Logan ever expected. Logan had always referred to Adams as his best friend with benefits, but with Matt's help, Logan actually realized somewhere along the line his heart had gotten invested beyond friendship, making the attack that much more traumatic. Their discussions over several sessions delved into Logan's progression from a survivor of sexual abuse to someone disinterested in sex, and finally embracing his sexuality. He and Matt had spent hours dissecting the complex web of his father's abuse, the weight of each memory palpable in the air as they explored how it had warped his understanding of romantic and casual relationships. Even though Logan felt he was doing better, he knew the journey in recovery was far from over. In fact, it wasn't difficult to suspect that the hardest discussions were ahead of them.

The hours spent with Matt had been far from easy. Logan had spent more time crying in the last three months than he had in the last thirty years of his life. Matt was always fantastic about making sure he was stable before kicking him out of the office. Then Logan would take his red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks home to Clay. He

knew Clay was curious about what he and Matt talked about, but he never pushed. Some nights, Logan would feed Clay a little piece of information like ‘We talked about the attack today’, and sometimes, he would look Clay in the eyes and then say, ‘It wasn’t a good day. Can we just chill out tonight?’ On those days Clay would break out the Ben and Jerry’s, cue up Netflix and they’d vegetate on the couch ‘til Logan felt his equilibrium restored.

In today’s session, Matt had asked Logan if he was ready to talk to Clay about his sexuality. Logan had thought for a long time before shrugging his shoulders. They’d discussed what reservations he had about being honest with Clay. All Logan could come up with was that he was afraid. If he told Clay the truth, would he look Logan in the eye, call him a hypocrite and walk away? Matt advised him of the possibility, but had challenged him to consider if living a lie was better?

Matt had asked Logan if his love for Clay was true. Predictably, Logan had gotten very defensive and blasted Matt with anger. Once he’d settled down, he’d discovered tears running down his cheeks, as he confessed to being terrified of losing the bond he and Clay had rebuilt in the last few months.

Now, as Logan walked home, he pondered Matt’s statement before leaving the office. You never get an answer to a question never posed. So Logan had to decide. From his perspective, he had two options. The first was to confess his sexuality to Clay but keep his love a secret. The second was to say a prayer and confess all, hoping against hope that somewhere deep inside Clay there would be the ability to not only forgive Logan for leaving under the conditions he had, but to return the love beating in his heart.

The tram came to a stop at the Broadway station and he exited the car. His and Clay’s apartment was only a few blocks away. The time to decide was closing in. Despite the chill in the fall air, his hands sweated and his normally quick pace faltered when their building appeared. He saw Clay’s car parked out front, and he stood still for a

moment. His gaze traveled up and caught the sight of Clay standing in the window watching, waiting for him to get home. Clay's hand rose in greeting and waved him home. Even from this distance, he saw the smile on Clay's face when their eyes met, and in that moment, he had his answer.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

He jogged the rest of the way, looking both ways before running across the street and up the stairs to the front door of the building. His feet barely touched each tread of the stairs before moving to the next, and when he reached the top level, he was out of breath.

The laxness of his conditioning since his discharge appalled him, and he promised to find a gym and get back in shape. His hand reached for the front door, but it whipped open before he could grab the handle.

Clay stood inside, still dressed for work, with the biggest smile he'd ever seen on the man's face. Clay grabbed Logan's hands and dragged him over to the caption phone the audiologist had arranged for them to get. Most people had gotten rid of their landlines, but Clay told Logan he wanted to have a backup way to contact any of his doctors just in case something happened to Logan's cell phone when Clay was at work. The phone had a large touchscreen where all the captions appeared but also came with an integrated voicemail. The system automatically transcribed any left messages when someone retrieved them.

At first, he thought someone might have been on the phone for him, but he saw the message light blinking. He looked at Clay and wondered what the big deal was.

Clay gestured toward the screen; a message awaited Logan. The number was the one they'd stored in the contact list for the VA. His heart tripped over itself for a couple of beats. This could be very good or very bad. His finger trembled as he reached for the menu button to access the stored message. Clay stood behind him, looking over his shoulder as the message scrolled across the screen.

This is Kelly from the VA. I'm calling to let you know you've been approved for two cochlear implants. Please call me to set up your first appointment.

Clay spun Logan around and wrapped him tight in his arms. The feel of Clay's muscled frame against him short circuited his brain. His mind went blank and his body numb. He should be jumping and screaming with joy now that the VA finally approved his claim, but all he could focus on was how fast his heart was beating, sending blood raging through his veins where it landed in his groin. His cock thickened as he inhaled the scent of Clay's aftershave.

Logan tilted his hips back, hoping, in Clay's exuberance, he wouldn't notice Logan's hard-on. When he realized his secret wasn't out of the closet yet, a smile blossomed across his face. They approved the implants! Logan couldn't believe it. He was actually going to understand words again. As the man lifted and swung him, he held onto Clay's neck. He could hear loud sounds coming out of Clay's mouth, but had no idea what the man was saying. It didn't matter, not now. They approved him!

Clay placed Logan back on the floor and looked into his eyes. "We're going out to celebrate."

Logan nodded his head. "Chart House?"

He saw Clay begin to say something else but stop before any words crossed his lips. Clay opened the live caption app on his phone. "Perfect, I'll call for a reservation."

Logan wanted to go out and celebrate the amazing news and figured it would also be an opportune time to come clean with Clay. He opened the restaurant's website to study the menu. His preparedness for service staff questions reduced stress. He watched as Clay spoke into the phone and smiled when the man gave him a thumbs up.

Clay hung up and held up the phone. "We need to leave. They got us a table in thirty minutes."

Logan lifted his cross-body satchel over his head and set it on the countertop. In all the excitement, he'd never put it down after coming in the door. He popped into the bathroom to take care of business and gave himself a quick pep talk to prepare for the confession later.

The mirror reflected two dark blue eyes staring back at him. On the outside, one would never know how broken he'd been only a couple of months ago. His appearance was like any other thirty-six-year-old. There were a few lines on the side of his eyes from squinting into the sun for too long. His hair had yet to show any signs of gray, despite the way he felt every one of his years, and then some, more often than not. He had definitely lost some of the bulk he'd had when active, but was still in decent shape. His body bore more than a few scars, though he concealed most of them under his clothes.

He looked down at his hands. Hands that had shed blood and staunched the flow of the same from leaving a buddy's body. Hands that had caressed a lover and beaten an enemy. He looked at the closed door to the bathroom and pictured Clay standing out there waiting for him.

It was time.

Clay thanked the hostess as she placed the leather-backed menus on their table. He glanced at the selections for a moment and decided to go with the miso maple glazed salmon. Wood-beamed ceiling arched overhead and abstract art dotted the red-bricked walls surrounding them. Sufficient lighting distributed throughout the restaurant enabled Logan to see Clay's face clearly, without excessively brightening the interior and ruining the ambiance. Clay looked across the table and gave Logan a smile. Logan's pearly whites flashed, and Clay's heart skipped a beat. Sentimental,

perhaps pathetic, Clay happily gazed into Logan's blue eyes until the waitress interrupted with their food.

Clay had made a significant dent in his food when he noticed the water in Logan's glass shook as he took a drink. Was it the crowd making Logan anxious? The room was fairly quiet, and they'd gotten a table in the back corner. Before accepting the table, Clay had made sure Logan could place his back to a wall. He knew the move well. While his back twitched from exposure, Logan's comfort was more important.

He placed his hand on top of Logan's. "Everything okay? Do you want to leave?"

"No, why?"

Clay pointed to the trembling hand now holding Logan's fork. A tense smile graced Logan's sensuous lips.

"It's not nerves. Sometimes they do that, and I don't realize it. Could be the drugs, I'm not sure. I'm having a great time. Thank you for bringing me."

Hearing Logan's voice after the months of silence still got to him. Despite the brush off, he'd become familiar with many of Logan's new behaviors over the last several months to know that hand tremors were not normal. Since Logan started working with the psychiatrist, the anxiety had improved, but clearly, something was bothering him. Not wanting to push the issue, Clay looked at him, telling him with his eyes that everything would be fine. Logan must have gotten the message, because his body noticeably relaxed, and his blue eyes now glowed.

The server removed their finished plates and asked if they would like any desert. They both denied the tempting offer, requesting coffee instead. Clay was stirring in his milk when he heard Logan's soft voice across from him.

“Clay?”

The break in silence startled him for a moment, and he sloshed a bit of hot coffee over the edge of the cup. Hissing, he shook off his finger and patted the skin of his hand with his napkin.

He looked across at Logan. “Oops.”

Logan reached for Clay’s hand, frowning. “Okay?”

Clay nodded. “I’m fine. It was more startling than actually painful.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Logan took a deep breath and began. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Oh God, was this the moment? Was Logan about to tell him the time had come for him to move on? Had he healed enough to reach out to his Army buddies and ask for their support with his recovery moving forward? Almost certainly, they understood what Logan went through better than Clay could ever hope to. Now that Logan received approval for the implants, he would spend much more time at the VA with his own kind. Oh shit, the VA. Boston's VA didn't have an implant program. Logan would have to get services out of state. He was moving. Clay knew it. Okay, he could do this. He would listen to what Logan had to say, then smile and make sure Logan didn't see the shattered pieces of his heart hit the floor.

Clay picked up his smartphone and waved it with a question. When he saw Logan shake his head, he frowned. If Logan didn't want the captions running, it must mean he wanted to talk and needed Clay to just listen.

“I need to apologize for leaving the way I did all those years ago.”

Clay opened his mouth to tell Logan it didn’t matter, but Logan’s hand went up to stop him.

“I know you think I ran because of what you said. In part, that’s true, but not for the reason you think. You see, I’ve been keeping a secret from you, as well. In fact, it’s the same secret you kept from me.”

Clay sat in shock. Wait what was happening? Did Logan just tell him he was gay? He didn’t understand. So many questions flew through his brain he couldn’t grasp a

single one until, “How long?”

“I began to suspect while I still lived with my dad. There’s more.”

Still lived with ... while the abuse was going on? Oh, fuck. Clay could not even imagine how confusing that must have been for Logan. But still he and Clay met at Mrs. Shelby's two years after Logan entered the system. They'd lived together for seven years! Logan had seven years to tell Clay. That was more than enough time to at least figure out some things, and yet he'd still run as if the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels when Clay had finally scrounged up the courage to tell him when they were twenty? But wait, there was more! Of course, there was more. There was always more.

“I didn’t run because I disapproved of you. I ran because when you admitted you were also gay, it shattered a barrier I’d been using to protect myself since we were teenagers. You see, Clayton, I love you. I’ve always loved you, and back then, that knowledge terrified me. I wasn’t ready to deal with both the fear and the desire. Not fear of you, but fear of myself. I didn’t know how to separate healthy sexual desire from the abuse. I was afraid my body would betray me and, in doing so ... destroy us.”

Clay’s shock passed hyper drive and went straight to ludicrous speed. His mind entered a semi-catatonic state. Logan loved him? Logan? The brother of his heart, his best friend and the man of his fantasies, was not only gay but loved him?

His heart wanted to jump up on the table and do a jig. Did this mean Logan wasn't leaving him? A brother in arms had n't replaced him? His heart beat so fast that he felt as if he'd just run a world-record hundred-meter dash, and his brain floated on a cloud of euphoria. He realized he'd been sitting there silently for several minutes. With each passing second, Logan’s body tensed, and the blue orbs, which had been open and honest for the first time in months, now darkened with despair.

“Let’s go home,” Clay said.

Clay flagged down the server and asked for the check. Logan barely looked him in the eye for the entire time it took for the server to run Clay's credit card. He put his hand on Logan's back as they walked out of the waterfront brick building. Logan hadn't been this stiff since the first weeks back in Boston.

Clay stopped them as they stood on the warf. The breeze whipped Logan's inky hair, and Clay's fingers itched to smooth the flyway strands. He settled for capturing Logan's chin to make sure the man looked at him. "Hey, I only wanted to leave because we clearly need to have a longer discussion, and I didn't want us to be constantly bothered by a well-meaning but tip-seeking waiter."

Logan nodded, but remained silent. He'd give anything to know what was going through the man's mind.

The drive seemed as if it lasted forever and not long enough. As ecstatic as he was about Logan’s news, he had questions and needed to tell Logan a few things of his own. The car was dark, so Logan wouldn’t be able to read his lips, but Clay wanted to give Logan some reassurance that everything would be okay.

They pulled up in front of the building, and he found a parking spot. Logan moved to open the passenger door, but before he grabbed the handle, Clay placed his hand on Logan’s thigh. The muscle hardened under his hand, and he gave it a squeeze. He felt the warmth of Logan’s body leaching through the material of his slacks, and he wanted to experience that heat on his bare skin.

Clay opened the driver's side door and met Logan on the other side. His hand stretched out in offering, and Logan’s fingers wove through his as they walked to the entrance of their building.

When they entered their apartment, he guided Logan over to the sofa, still holding hands. Logan sat on the plush leather, and before sitting directly across from him on the padded leatherottoman, Clay switched on the lamp perched on the end table. Retrieving the iPad, he opened the caption app. He set the tablet up on the little built in stand that came with the case. He held out his hands, and Logan grasped them with a pleading look in his eyes. “I opened the app because what I have to say is important, and I need to make sure you understand me. You stop me if you can’t follow.” Logan nodded.

“I’ve waited twenty years to hear you say those three words, but as you know, those years have been far from easy for us. I know I’ve said that I don’t need your apologies for the way you left, and that’s true. However, I need to tell you what it was like for me. Keeping my sexuality a secret from you was the hardest thing I had to do. I don’t know everything about what happened to you as a child, but I knew enough that I thought living with a man who had the desires I did would be difficult, if not terrifying. I valued our friendship too much to risk that. You were all I had, Logan. You were the only person who’d never given up on me, never abandoned me. And then ... you did. I can’t even describe the pain I felt when you left. I’m not saying this to make you feel bad, but so you can understand my surprise at the bomb you dropped earlier. When I told you I was gay, and you ran ... I thought it was my fault. I thought ... you were afraid of me. That I would hurt you, like your father did.” Tears rolled down his face, but he had no willpower to stop them. “I would never hurt you, Logan. Not like that. I would have done anything to ease your fears. If that meant never touching you again, I would have done it. But you never gave me the chance.”

Logan slid to his knees on the floor in front of Clay. He used his thumbs to wipe away the tears streaming down Clay’s cheeks.

Clay felt Logan’s breath on his lips. He saw the tears pooling in the dark blue eyes. For a moment, he allowed their foreheads to touch before continuing. “After I pulled

myself together, I tried dating. I really did. I slept with too many men, trying to find someone who evoked the same feelings you could with a simple touch. It was only after I finished my degree and joined the police academy that I determined promiscuous sex would solve nothing. It didn't ease the hurt, it didn't bring back my best friend, and it definitely didn't find me love."

Logan pointed to the sofa, and Clay moved so he sat next to him. Their heads rested on the back of the cushions and turned so they could see each other's faces.

"I searched for you for years. Once I finished at the academy and started working, I used every connection available to find you. One day, when I was at Carol and Jack's, not too long before he died, I saw a photo of you in uniform. You and two others were standing in front of a burned-out, multilevel building. All the surrounding buildings were in crumbles. You had smiles on your faces. It was a little odd. Seeing your smiling face amongst all that destruction."

Logan smiled. "A buddy took that during my first deployment. We'd just been involved in some serious urban warfare. I guess we were happy because we were alive. I sent it to Jack and Carol, so they'd have something of me should anything happen. Before Jack got sick, I received a few letters from them."

"When you came home for his funeral and I saw you in your uniform, I couldn't look away. You left before I could talk to you. Why?"

"I saw you watching me. I saw how sad you were and wanted to walk over and hold you so bad but didn't know how you would react had I approached you. I figured that wasn't an occasion to hash out our issues."

"Carol gave me one of your photos. It sits on my desk at work."

Logan stiffened. "You keep a photo of me on your desk? Why?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Clay took a deep breath and let it out. “Because I love you too. So what now? Where do we go from here?”

Logan looked into Clay’s gray eyes. His gaze settled on the lips he’d kissed so many times in his dreams. His hand landed on Clay’s chest, and his palm slid up to cup Clay behind his neck. Clay’s eyes closed, his lips parted. Logan’s thumb rubbed in slow circles below Clay’s earlobe. In tiny increments, he closed the distance between their bodies. Their noses touched, and Logan slid his to the side. The flesh rubbed back and forth. Only a hair’s distance separated their open mouths. Each inhaled the breath of the other. When Clay’s tongue flicked out to moisten his lips, the tip caught Logan’s lower brim. The damp warmth caused Logan’s breath to catch.

As one, they moved. Their lips brushed tentatively. The mingling flesh lingered for seconds, then the gap between them closed. Their mouths merged over and over as they moved together, the pressure increasing exponentially.

Logan got the first sample of Clay’s skin as his tongue edged along the lower lip, seeking entry. From the first taste, he knew he was a goner.

Clay’s arm wrapped around Logan’s back, pulling their bodies together. Logan ended up straddling Clay’s thighs. His hands cupped Clay’s cheeks as their tongues explored each other’s mouths. Clay’s taste was the most incredible thing he’d ever experienced. The sweetness of Clay’s mouth only fed the fire racing under Logan’s skin. He rocked against Clay’s hips, his hands buried in the silky hair he’d admired for so long. The slick appendages of their tongues slid back and forth as the intensity of the kiss increased. Exquisite pleasure, unlike he’d ever experienced, consumed him, and his cock stiffened in need.

Logan ripped open Clay's shirt. He separated the halves as he nibbled across Clay's jaw and down his neck. He traced the contours of Clay's chest. Clay's moan vibrated beneath the pads of his fingers, and when he reached the hardened nipples, Logan's shirt was wrenched from his pants, and eager hands slid beneath the material. His skin tingled in response to the touch, and he sought more contact.

Clay leaned forward, and Logan pushed the dress shirt off Clay's broad shoulders. The smooth, hot skin beneath his hands was firm. Their mouths met once again in a torrent of need. Fingers clenched and fabric bunched as each of them undressed the other.

When their bare chests touched for the first time, in the heat of the moment, twin groans echoed in the still air surrounding their bodies. Clay's arms wrapped around Logan's torso as they clung together. The shirt hampered Logan's reach, still clinging to the lower half of his arms. Clay's hard cock pressed against his beneath their slacks. Together, they thrust, seeking pressure. Logan scrapped his teeth against Clay's earlobe as Clay's scored the skin of his shoulder.

Hands scrambled at the fastenings of their belts. Buttons and zippers opened. Clay's hand reached inside Logan's briefs to grasp his cock, threatening to destroy the last of Logan's sanity. As incredible as it felt, he didn't want to spill in Clay's hand while semi-dressed on the sofa. With the last of his resolve, he pulled Clay's hand away from his skin and sat back.

Clay's eyes searched his in question.

Logan moved off Clay's lap. Standing before him, he pushed off his shoes and socks. Slowly, he walked backwards towards Clay's bedroom. While he moved, he undid the cuffs of his shirt, letting the material fall away. Next, he slid his hands into the waistband of his briefs and pushed them, along with his slacks, down in one shove. His legs kicked to rid himself of the clothing. For the first time, he stood before Clay,

naked and aroused.

Clay's gray eyes turned the color of storm clouds as they traveled up and down his body. Logan wrapped his hand around his stiff cock. He stroked himself, catching the beads of liquid on the tip with his thumb and smeared them around the head. His back hit the wall, and he froze.

Clay rose from the sofa, each movement an exemplar of grace and strength. Pace by pace, Clay stalked him, stripping the remaining clothes hanging off his body as he came closer.

Logan's eyes burned as he devoured each inch of revealed skin. When Clay unveiled his cock, Logan's mouth watered, and he swallowed convulsively, imagining what it would feel like to take the long, thick column of flesh deep inside his body.

Clay paused, only inches from where Logan stood. Their eyes met for seconds, and time froze. The hunger arced between their bodies. Without a word, Clay passed him and entered the bedroom.

Logan expelled the air trapped in his lungs. He rolled along the wall and through the doorway.

Inside, Clay stood beside the king-sized platform bed, his tight round ass on perfect display as he dug around in the nightstand.

Logan closed the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around Clay from behind. His hands splayed across Clay's chest and tweaked Clay's nipples as he snuggled his cock in the crack of Clay's ass. He'd imagined this moment for so long, countless hours of fantasizing about making love to Clay. Untold number of masturbation fantasies starred his cock, sinking deep inside Clay's ass, the tight heat surrounding his throbbing flesh as he thrust inside over and over again until they

screamed.

He ground his hips against Clay, telling him without words how he wanted the first time to proceed. His lips traced Clay's cheek, and his hands wandered all over the toned torso in front of him.

Clay tossed a condom and a bottle of lube onto the surface of the bed. Logan placed his hands on Clay's hips, pushing him towards the flat surface. Climbing onto the mattress, Clay gave Logan a glimpse of his smooth, full balls hanging low, ready for release.

He removed his hearing aids and placed them on the nightstand. Without his hearing aids, silence returned, yet he required no sound. No words were necessary for what he and Clay were about to share.

His hands smoothed up and over the globes of Clay's ass. His hands latched onto Clay's hips, halting his progress across the mattress. Logan bent to place a kiss at the base of Clay's spine. The scent of Clay's skin assailed his senses, and he gave a little lick into the trench awaiting him.

Clay's arms collapsed, and his hips lifted, pressing back into Logan's ministrations. Logan separated Clay's cheeks and traced his tongue along the furrow, stopping to swirl around the tightly clenched ring of muscle guarding Clay's entrance. Round and round the tip of his tongue circled, then flicked across the entrance. Slowly, the muscle relaxed, and Logan pressed inward, breaching the hole. Clay's hips rocked back and forth until Logan seized them in his grasp. He licked and sucked at Clay's opening until his cock throbbed. The blood pulsing so hard he swore he could count the beats of his heart.

Logan pushed on Clay's back to lower him to the bed. His lover rolled over and lifted his arms in greeting. Logan picked up the condom and rolled it down his cock.

His eyes closed, and he took several breaths, trying to get his body under control. There was no way he would let this first time end in a matter of seconds once he found his way inside.

When Logan opened his eyes, the sight of Clay's fingers buried inside his ass, stretching himself open greeted him. Two digits burrowed deep as Clay's storm cloud eyes met his.

Logan picked up the bottle of lube and coated his fingers. Clay moved to pull his fingers out, but Logan stopped him. He held Clay's wrist in one hand and slid one finger from his other hand inside beside those already filling Clay's channel. When their fingers brushed inside the plush, heated core, both their bodies shivered.

Logan braced himself over Clay. Their nearly identical heights allowed them to be face to face as Logan pushed his cock inside. Their mouths met as Clay wrapped his arms around Logan and arched into the slow thrust. Inch by inch, Logan filled his lover, eliminating all space between them. Their meeting eyes halted time for a moment. Light filled Logan's spirit the second he read the words forming on the lips he craved.

"I love you."

Clay clung to Logan as he moved, slowly. Logan's hips retreated until only the head of his cock lodged inside Clay, then surged forward, filling him to capacity. Each long stroke caused bolts of sensation to rip through his body. Logan aimed for Clay's prostate with each drive, and judging by the expression on Clay's face, he scored direct hits.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Clay lifted his legs and wrapped them around Logan's hips.

No words could describe the emotions surging through him as he and Clay made love. Each touch, each pant of breath on his skin, enhanced the pleasure tenfold. Logan was sure weird animalistic grunts and moans escaped from him with every thrust of his cock deep inside Clay's body. Part of him mourned the fact that he couldn't hear Clay's sounds, but touch spoke a thousand words, and Clay enunciated each one that their meaning was unmistakable.

With each drive of Logan's body inside Clay, they moved further up the bed. Clay braced his hands on the padded leather insert of his headboard. He used the leverage to meet each of Logan's plunges.

Logan bent his head and captured Clay's nipple between his lips, sucking on the hardened nub until vibrations of Clay's cries tickled his lips. A hot spot, maybe? Logan would have to explore that in the future. A lot.

His balls pulled up tight against his body. The beginning of his climax brewed in his lower back. Clay reached for his cock, but his head came dangerously close to colliding with the headboard. Logan wrapped his fist around Clay's cock and pulled. The added stimulus was all Clay needed, and with only a few tugs, jets of come shot from him. Logan's climax roared through his body. Wave after wave of sensation pummeled through him. His cock erupted so violently it nearly hurt, but the pain was delicious as he finally, after years of fantasizing, screamed Clay's name when he came.

The lines on the highway raced past Logan as he stared out the window from the passenger seat. Miles of road stretched before them as he and Clay drove south towards West Haven, Connecticut. He was required to go there or New York City for the implant services.

His mind raced with disjointed thoughts of what would happen in the coming days. His initial euphoria and excitement at the news of his approval for the implants now morphed into trepidation. What if the surgery didn't work? What if, after they sliced his head open, they found out the electrodes wouldn't thread through his cochlea like they should? What if he went through all this and still couldn't hear? What if there was a side effect of the surgery like his taste got affected or the ringing got worse?

The past month had comprised visit after visit to the VA hospital. Test after test. The neurotologists and audiologists had dissected every little neuron of his auditory system. If he had to sit in one more soundproof booth and strain to hear non-existent beeps, he would go mad. They'd scanned his head and flipped him back and forth so many times he'd tossed his cookies on more than one occasion. God, his vertigo had loved that little session. He'd survived lip-reading tests and countless hours in counseling to discuss realistic expectations. In a way, those counseling sessions were so much harder than the physical tests.

He'd been so high at the prospect of being able to hear again, but watching the audiologists tell him everything that might or might not improve had almost sucked the joy out of the experience. He understood they had to say those things. Realistic goals were crucial, but come on, give a guy a bone.

Now, the time had come. Tomorrow at oh-six-hundred, he would check into the hospital, and the real adventure would begin.

Logan felt Clay thread his fingers through his, giving them a squeeze. He looked across the interior of the car and saw Clay glance at him, while trying to maintain

attention on the road. Logan smiled back and returned the squeeze.

He knew Clay would be there with him every step of the way in the coming months, and that helped keep the anxiety from consuming him.

God, he loved this man sitting next to him. Day after day, test after test, Clay had stood beside him. He'd even come to a couple of Logan's sessions with Matt.

When they were young men, he'd thought he knew what it meant to desire Clay, to love Clay, but he'd had no idea. On the days when all he wanted to do was scream, Clay calmed him. On days he wanted to curl up and cry, Clay held him. And at night, when the nightmares came, Clay consumed him with passion.

He'd moved into Clay's bedroom immediately, following their first time together. The nights spent in each other's arms gave him more strength to face the next day than all the training the Army could throw at him. Clay could make his body shiver with a single look from those stormy gray eyes, and his body would burn with one touch of a finger.

The lovers of his past had not prepared him for what it would be like in Clay's bed. One night, after a particularly rough day, Clay had licked every inch of his body, over and over, until Logan had begged and pleaded. His lover held him in suspension for what seemed like an eternity, and when Clay filled Logan with his cock, the sensation had sent Logan spiraling into an orgasmic black hole that sucked every ounce of ecstasy from the very marrow of his bones. Thinking about that night made him hard, and he squirmed in the car's seat as he felt his body temperature rise.

Clay's hand captured Logan's chin and turned his head so they faced each other. "What are you thinking about over there?"

Logan looked down at his crotch and tried to adjust himself into a more comfortable

position. “That night.”

Clay smiled. “It was amazing. The sounds you made, the feel of your skin beneath my tongue and your body wrapped around my cock. I convinced myself I’d found nirvana.

Clay’s words fired up his blood, and his pulse raced. His mind screamed that this play was dangerous. They were driving down an interstate highway, for fuck’s sake, but his body refused to listen. Logan’s cock pushed against his jeans. The thick material trapped the flesh in a cage of desire. He wanted to free the beast and succumb to Clay’s incendiary images.

“How long before we get there?” Logan asked.

“Another twenty minutes.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes, we will.”

Clay turned back to face the road and pushed a little harder on the gas pedal. He’d been watching Logan out of the corner of his eye the whole trip. He knew Logan was nervous about the next couple of days. Not so much the surgery itself, but what would happen afterward.

Logan had held up so well, given the rollercoaster of demands and feelings during the past month. Clay never wanted Logan to know, but he’d had his own fears about what it would mean should the implants not perform the way Logan prayed. The sessions he’d attended with Matt, both with Logan and on his own, had been very beneficial to teaching Clay how to be as supportive of Logan as possible. One thing he’d learned was that sometimes Logan still needed his space. Clay didn’t want his

attempts at being supportive to be perceived by Logan as him hovering.

Clay sometimes returned from the precinct to find Logan staring at the ceiling in his old room; his hearing aids lay on the nightstand. It was almost as if Logan used the silence he'd loathed as a peaceful escape.

Clay pulled into the parking lot for their hotel. They'd reserved a room for a week. Tomorrow's procedure would be outpatient, assuming everything went according to plan. Logan was getting simultaneous bilateral implants, which was atypical, but given the risk of bone growth in Logan's inner ear because of the fractures he sustained in the head injury the surgeon sought approval for doing both implants at the same time instead of waiting to do the second surgery. If the bony growth, which the surgeon had called a long name with multiple syllables, got too thick, a second implant may not be as successful or even possible down the road. The VA hospital had also offered Logan the option of doing early activation of his processors. That meant instead of waiting for the standard two weeks after surgery, Logan would hear sound through the implants four days after waking up from anesthesia.

Despite the wandering of his mind, Clay's arousal hadn't abated in the last twenty minutes. Taunting Logan a little while ago might not have been the most thought out plan. He didn't look forward to sauntering into the hotel lobby sporting a raging hard-on. He grimaced, then heard a soft chuckle from the seat next to him. When he looked over at Logan, he saw a smirk on the beautiful man's face.

“Shut up.”

Clay shoved the door open and climbed out of the car. He crossed the front of the vehicle and jerked open Logan’s passenger door. He tugged Logan’s frame from the sedan and pushed him up against the side of the vehicle. Their mouths moved within inches of each other, and Logan’s gaze burned into his.

“If I have to go inside like this, then so do you.” Clay placed a tiny kiss on Logan’s lips, then turned away. He clasped Logan’s hand in his and dragged the man behind him. Logan’s feet dug into the pavement for a few steps, but Clay had determination on his side. The man behind the counter had a startled look in his eyes as they breached the sliding glass doors, but quickly smiled when he spied their linked hands.

“May I help you, gentleman?”

“Yes, we have a reservation for Phillips.”

Clay watched as the attendant typed away at the computer for a few seconds. Clay’s arm gathered Logan’s body close to his side, and his hand slid into the back pocket of Logan’s jeans.

A low voice behind them whispered, ‘faggots’. He turned and saw an old man with a shock of white hair reading a newspaper and drinking a cup of coffee. Clay didn’t know if the voice belonged to him, but had no intention of forcing the issue.

“I see you’re booked for six nights with a king bed. Is that correct?”

Clay faced the counter once again. "Yes. My partner is having surgery tomorrow. He'll be doing part of his recovery here before we go home. I'm assuming the hotel doesn't have any policies against deliveries. Should we need any supplies or want meals from a local restaurant brought in?"

The clerk had a surprised look for a moment, then gave Logan a once over. His eyes seemed to search for what was wrong, and they lingered a little too long on Logan's lips. Clay tapped his fingers on the countertop.

"That's no problem. I'll forewarn my manager of your situation so the staff won't disturb your room. Should you need anything, simply contact us via text or call the front desk. Hopefully, everything will go as planned."

"That's what we're praying for," Clay said.

Clay slid the little folder holding their room key across the granite and peeked at the number. Capturing Logan's attention, he said, "Come on. Let's go finish what we started."

A quick scan of the lobby area revealed the only bodies present were them and the young man behind the counter. His hand slipped behind Logan's neck and drew their mouths together.

He had intended the kiss to be possessive but brief. However, once his lips claimed Logan's, his body screamed at him to find the nearest flat surface and screw like bunnies, regardless of an audience. Logan met his tongue thrust for thrust. Their lips devoured each other, their bodies smashed together and their hands clutched at any available hold.

Clay gathered his fragmented consciousness and gentled the kiss until, with a lingering lick, they separated. Electric blue eyes met stormy gray and tiny smiles

graced lips swollen from passion. Behind the desk, the kid's desire-slackened expression confirmed that Clay's mission had succeeded.

"Holy fuck, you two are hot," the clerk said. "I don't suppose you play, do you? I've got a dinner break coming to me."

"Sorry, kid. I never learned to share with others." Clay looked at Logan to see if he'd caught the kid's question.

Logan's gaze moved from Clay to the clerk. "He's mine."

They quickly dragged their suitcases into the elevator and Clay jammed the button for their assigned floor. The car rose and with every number that lit up on the screen, Clay's heart beat faster. Logan didn't help with his nuzzling and roaming hands.

Clay tapped the key on the electronic lock pad and pushed the door open. He had the door shut, locked, and started stripping off his sports shirt in under five seconds. Completely naked in under sixty, he spun around to find Logan in a similar state of undress. They jumped for the bed and bounced into each other's arms. Limbs tangled as they picked up where the kiss downstairs had left off.

Logan's hearing aids squealed when Clay rolled on top and pressed his head into the pillows. He removed the behind-the-ear devices, powered them off, then set them on the side table.

"You don't need to hear me. I want you to focus on each kiss ... each caress."

Clay lowered his head to Logan's neck and dragged his lips down the side of the corded muscle. Logan's neck arched, and his hands clutched onto Clay's back, holding him in place. Logan's skin held a lingering scent of his aftershave from that morning, and the lemony flavor tantalized Clay's taste buds. Clay was careful not to

leave marks, but set about devouring Logan's body as their hips ground together. Their cocks bumped, and both men gasped. So much ... so much!

Clay's hands braced on either side of Logan's heaving chest. When he reached Logan's nipple, Clay latched on with a ferociousness they'd yet to experience together. He sucked and bit at the hard protrusion. Clay had learned over the past month that Logan's nipples were as sensitive as his, and the man loved having them stimulated roughly. Harder even than Clay himself. His teeth scored the tender flesh, only to soothe the sting with licks across and around each nub. Drawing one into the cavern of his mouth, he sucked it, while twisting and tugging on the other with his fingers.

Logan's cock rubbed against his belly, and Clay longed to swallow the thick length. He slid down and, with no preamble, fisted the base, opened his mouth and sank down the hard, leaking flesh. Logan's shout above his head only urged him on. Fingers twisted in his hair, and he went to work. He quickly slid up and down the pulsing column.

Logan planted his feet on the bedspread and opened his legs to give Clay more room. Clay worked the hard cock as deep as he could take it, using his fist to jerk the remaining inches at the base. His other hand captured Logan's balls and rolled the full globes, tickling the sensitive skin behind the sac with his fingertips. He wanted to fuck Logan so bad. His hips humped the mattress beneath them. His cock searched for any type of stimulation, desperate and needy.

The novelty of feeling Logan's naked skin next to his was still so fresh that each touch sent sparks up and down his body. The knowledge that he controlled Logan's pleasure and Logan controlled his made Clay crave every opportunity to explore their physical love. There were days at the office where he would go about his duties, and an image would flash in his mind of Logan's expression as he came. After a particularly eventful night, Clay had spent an entire day trying to hide a recurring

erection because, each time he sat, he recalled how it felt to have Logan's cock stretching his channel, driving into him so perfectly he'd come without a touch to his cock not once but twice.

Logan's hand squeezed his shoulder, telling Clay he was about to explode. Clay renewed his efforts, concentrating on the head of Logan's cock. He flicked his tongue into the slit over and over, while his hand stroked up and down. He knew Logan was close. Tension crept up Logan's body. Sensing the impending climax, Clay swallowed Logan's cock all the way to the base and smiled as best as he could with Logan's cock stuffed down his throat. When a hoarse cry accompanied jets of semen filling his throat, Clay drew up to savor the taste of Logan's come and kept sucking until Logan signaled his cock had become too sensitive to handle any more.

Clay flopped onto his back, taking his cock in hand. He knew it would only take a few firm yanks to make him come, but Logan's hand wrapped around his, halting the motion before he could finish himself off. He growled in frustration and turned his head to look at his lover. Logan shook his head and squeezed Clay's hand, which put pressure on the base of his cock, halting his imminent release with a groan. His head arched back into the bedspread and he closed his eyes, taking several deep breaths. Over the buzzing in his ears, Clay picked up the sound of foil tearing. His eyes opened, and he watched Logan open a single use packet of lube.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“Where did you have that stashed?” Clay asked.

“Jeans. Had a feeling we’d need it.”

“God, I love you.”

Blood surged into his cock, and Clay used every trick in the book to prevent himself from coming at the thought of sinking deep inside Logan’s body. Logan squeezed out a dollop of the super-concentrated lube. When the cool gel touched the heated skin of Clay’s cock, shivers raced down his spine. A dark red flush tinted the skin of his engorged flesh. Large veins twisting up the steel column throbbed with impassioned vigor. Clear fluid eased from the slit and dribbled down the length of his cock.

Logan reached behind and used the remaining lube to prepare his entrance. Clay wished he had a better view. One of his favorite pastimes was watching Logan’s fingers disappear into the tight, hot tunnel of his ass.

Logan efficiently completed his task and moved to straddle Clay’s hips. Clay knew that the quick bit of preparation wouldn’t be enough to fully stretch Logan’s opening, so despite the need thundering through his body, this would have to be a slow descent. They’d done away with the condoms since Logan had undergone every test conceivable and Clay’s blood work had come back clean a couple of weeks ago.

Logan used Clay’s chest for balance as he maneuvered himself into position. Clay stabilized his cock and positioned the dripping crown at the entrance to Logan’s body. When blood rushed from his brain, hardening his length to greater dimensions, he moaned. He nudged against Logan’s puckered hole and popped through the tight

ring of muscle. The heat of Logan's body seared his flesh as he tunneled to greater depths. The gradual descent only compounded the sensations of sinking into heaven. Logan eventually took all of him. They paused for a moment, and Clay savored the feel of Logan's plush channel gripping his cock. The muscles danced along his length as they relaxed, giving Clay room to fuck Logan into oblivion. Logan's face was a study of bliss. His normal dark blue eyes were bright as if they were lasers and seared into Clay's. The damp skin of Logan's torso glowed as he lifted and dropped his body over Clay's. Clay clenched his ass and thrust up with his hips, impaling Logan harder on his length. A cry of ecstasy greeted his ears. Logan's body gyrated, no longer a slow rise and fall. He rode Clay's cock as if he were a man possessed.

Logan slammed up and down on Clay's cock; short nails scored Clay's chest.

Oh, it felt so good.

Clay's hands locked on Logan's hips, his fingertips pushing into the skin. He suspected there might be bruising in the morning, and the knowledge that his mark would brand Logan's body added fuel to the fire. His hips surged to meet Logan's descent. The delirium of such intense pleasure snapped the threads of all constructive brain activity. All he knew was the rapture of Logan's body and the demands of his.

Clay growled orders in a hoarse voice before realizing Logan would never hear them. It didn't matter. Logan knew what he needed; Logan always knew. Clay's eyes rolled back into his head and his chest billowed as Logan stimulated Clay's nipples the way he loved. Yes, Logan always knew.

Logan's hard cock waved back and forth as their bodies met in a frenzy of need. Clay couldn't take it anymore. He had to come. Lifting Logan several inches in the air, he jack-knifed in and out of Logan's body at such a rapid pace all Logan could do was hold on. Each thrust was deeper and harder than the one before.

Mindless cries sang from Logan's lips. Clay prayed for release. Lights flashed behind his eyes, and his orgasm boiled up from the core of his body. He watched the tendons in Logan's neck pull taut, his eyes shot open, and Logan's cock erupted in a torrent of seed.

Clay plunged, fucking Logan through his orgasm. Heat raced through his veins, plunging him into convulsions, and with one last surge, he exploded. Jets of come spewed from his shaft into Logan's ass. Waves of exultation crashed over him and swept him out into mind numbing ecstasy.

Logan's body sank on top of his. Clay's heart pounded, and Logan's sweaty head nestled into the crook of his neck. Clay rubbed his hands up and down Logan's back, soothing his lover in the aftermath of such an intense experience. Their bodies eventually separated, and Logan collapsed beside him. He pulled Logan close and tucked their bodies together, legs tangling on top of the covers, arms wrapped around each other's waists. He pulled one half of the bedspread over their naked bodies, and Logan pulled the other.

Cocooned in satiated bliss, they slept.

Chapter Nine

Clay paced the surgical waiting room, cup of coffee in hand. Two hours had passed since the nurses wheeled Logan back. Since both devices were being implanted, the surgeon had estimated the total procedure time would be around two and a half to two and three-quarters hours.

Clay had been beside Logan throughout the surgical prep. They'd brought a dry erase board so Logan could communicate with the staff easier since they didn't know the status of Wi-Fi or if the tablet with the caption app was allowed back in the surgical theater. Even with the communication adaptations, Clay still ended up having to

answer some of their questions. They'd kept the displays of affection quashed since they were in a VA hospital. The military may be more inclusive than in years past, but discretion was still the better part of valor.

Clay didn't know the policy on sexual discrimination, but neither of them had been willing to jeopardize Logan's procedure by revealing their true relationship. When they'd transported Logan away, it had taken everything in him not to bend down and place a kiss on the man's lips.

They'd woken that morning with the night still heavy in the sky and made love languidly. Logan had taken him with such gentleness it almost brought tears to Clay's eyes. Now, he waited in a utilitarian room, filled with uncomfortable chairs and the noise of some news channel buzzing from the television in the corner. A sign on the desk warned against cell phone use, so Clay took a walk to the entrance of the surgery center and stepped outside the sliding glass doors. He scrolled through his contact list until he found the name he wanted. Leaning against the side of the building, he waited for the call to be connected.

"Hello?"

"Ryan?"

"Clay! What's up buddy?"

The sound of Ryan Ashton's friendly voice did a lot to ease some of Clay's antsiness. During the investigation into Ryan's husband Ethan's attack, the three of them had become close friends, and right now Clay could use a friend.

"I've been pacing out of my skin, so I thought I'd call you."

"What's wrong, Clay? Is it Logan? Has something happened? I thought he was doing

better?”

“Oh shit. I never told you. Things have been so crazy the past month. We haven’t talked, and I know you and Ethan are always so busy at work?”

“Clay! Spit it out, man.”

“We’re in West Haven. Logan was approved. He’s in surgery.”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“Holy shit! I can’t believe you didn’t call us. We would have come with you. Been there for you both.”

“I know ... I know. I wouldn’t have asked anyway, but it’s nice to know.”

“Clay, after everything you did for Ethan after his attack ... we’d do anything for you, man.”

“Who knew we’d end up here, given where we started?”

“Are you talking about you and Logan, or our friendship?”

“Either ... both, I don’t know.”

“Well, I can’t speak for Logan, but Ethan and I consider our lives richer for having you in it. You and Logan have had a hard, long journey to get where you are. I can’t imagine the roller coaster of emotions the two of you have dealt with since you were teenagers. That’s your past. You’re together. You’re solid. Logan is healing, and today is one more step on that journey. Each new day is further from the pain of your past. The best piece of advice I can give you is when you wake in the morning, turn to each other and greet the new day in thanks. Then go live every moment you have together to the fullest.”

Clay leaned his head back against the building and tried to prevent an errant tear from sliding down his face at Ryan’s heartfelt advice. He knew Ryan believed and lived every word. Ethan’s attack last winter had nearly killed him, and the two of them had used the experience to solidify their relationship. Instead of focusing on what could

have happened, they celebrated each day and lived for the next.

“Clay? You there, man?”

“Yeah ... how’d a G-man get to be so damn smart?”

“While you gumshoes are making hourly stops at the nearest Krispy Kreme, us G-men are actually training.”

“Hmm, in this training, do they let you talk to actual suspects or are you still role playing with dolls?”

“You leave Ginger out of this. She could take your ass any day.”

Clay laughed. “That image is disturbing on so many levels. Besides, only one person has unlimited access to my ass. Thanks, Ryan.”

“No problem, buddy. You call us the moment he’s out of surgery. When you two get home and settle in, let’s all have a quiet dinner together. Nothing crazy, just four friends.”

“That sounds great. I’m gonna go. Tell Ethan I said hi.”

“Will do.”

Clay felt much better after talking to Ryan. He was calm in his skin once again and vowed not to drink one more cup of coffee. The thousands of milligrams of caffeine most likely hadn’t helped the situation. He chucked a still half-full cup in the nearest trashcan and headed back towards the waiting room. When he arrived, he opened his laptop, connected to the internet through the hospital’s wireless connection, popped in his custom ear monitors, opened his Apple Music on his phone, then set about

responding to the multitude of emails he'd received in the past several days. The department had been accommodating about Clay's need for time off to get Logan back and forth to his appointments. Hell, Clay had the equivalent of six weeks of PTO banked. When he'd put in the request, his sergeant appeared at his desk asking when pigs had learned to fly. However, even though he was out of the office, he and Tim still had active cases they were working on. He clicked on another unread email. It looked like they'd finally gotten some result back from the crime lab on the home invasion homicide from three weeks ago. He unlocked his phone and opened his messages to text Tim.

Just saw email from crime lab. What the hell is hair ice and why was it on our body in South Boston?

I'm sorry, this number has been disconnected until dumbass detectives return from PTO or the apocalypse, whichever comes first. Also stop harassing crime labs over frozen fungus. Yeah, I know you sent a chat to Lindsey.

Tim, I'm climbing the walls waiting to hear if Logan's out of surgery. Help me distract myself. Throw me a bone here.

Sorry, I don't swing that way. Also, I enjoy living, and flirting with the boyfriend of a highly trained Army Ranger sounds like a fast track to a Viking funeral. You want a distraction? Go back and reread that report. Some kind of freak fungus made the guy's hair freeze like fairy floss. You can't make this crap up.

Fairy floss? Did you hit your head?

I watch British crime dramas when I can't sleep. Sue me

Grrrr... you're an asshole!

And yet... you love my asshole. It's like a Hallmark card, but with more cursing and trauma bonding.

You keep talking like that and I'm filing a hostile work environment report.

I am the hostile work environment. Also, this number is now officially ignoring all pissant partners who text me about a case when they are emotionally compromised.

You're not wrong. I can't even think straight right now. You really think I should sit this one out?

I know you should. You're no good to the case like this. Take care of Logan. The dead guy in Southie isn't going anywhere. Like literally. He's in the freezer downstairs cooler than a scoop of Van Leeuwen's Hazelnut Fudge Cookie.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Damn it. Why do you always have to make sense when I least want to hear it?

That's what makes me the brains of this operation and I get paid the big bucks.

Tim, I keep telling you—those colorful bills the LT gave you? Not legal tender. That's Monopoly money.

Maybe. But I bought three fake hotels and emotionally bankrupted Internal Affairs with it, so who's laughing now?

Sheath thy sword, drama queen.

Afraid my sword's too big for you to handle?

Oh, I'm sure your sword is mighty... mighty underwhelming. Like a lightsaber from Wish.

BTW...Thanks

NP. Call me when he's in recovery.

He closed the app. Tim really was the best. Two months ago, he'd taken his partner to The City Tap House and come clean about his and Logan's full backstory. He didn't share any part of Logan's history before entering the foster system, but honesty was critical to his and Tim's partnership. As much as they all tried to deny it, personal lives bled into professional ones, and Tim needed to understand the depths of Clay's involvement with Logan. He'd shared where he and Logan came from, where they

were now, and their hopes for the future. The recent shift in their relationship shocked Tim; he had assumed Clay and Logan were just one of those on-again, off-again couples.

This past week, Clay had been a nervous wreck, and his partner had seriously stepped up. He and Sam had welcomed Logan into their lives with open arms. Clay knew the pair were eager to see how Logan would do once the implants were activated. Emails reviewed and organized into folders for priority review later, Clay browsed through an audiobook website and selected the latest release from one of his favorite authors. He'd listened to several of their books because the narrator brought the pages to life. He didn't care what anyone claimed. An AI generated audiobook never stood up against an authentic voice actor. He opened the file and set about escaping into the world of intrigue, espionage, and sexy spies.

He sat with his eyes closed—captivated by the drama unfolding through his ears—but jumped when a hand tapped him on the shoulder from behind. He spun his head and saw a nurse standing there with a smile on her face.

Clay removed the earbuds.

“Sorry. I was pretty engrossed in what I was doing.”

“It’s fine. I can be pretty oblivious when I have mine on. I wanted to let you know Mr. Callen is out of surgery. The doctor will call you in a few moments. After you’re done with the call, you’ll receive a text message when you can head back to the recovery area to see him.”

Clay looked at his watch, surprised to see that another hour had passed. “Thank you very much.”

Clay packed up his stuff. He started his audiobook again, but couldn't concentrate on

the story. He opened one of his social media apps and mindlessly scrolled. When his phone rang through his earbuds, he almost threw it across the room.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Phillips?”

Clay tried to make his voice sound far more stable than he actually was. “Yes.”

“This is Dr. Cleary. Mr. Callen’s out of surgery, and he did beautifully. The procedures went as planned. He’s in recovery and should wake up soon. I need to caution you that with his history of vestibular insult from the head injury, he may be very dizzy for the next couple of days. How he is when he wakes up will determine how long we keep him.”

Clay let out a heavy breath. “Thank you, doctor.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll be checking on Mr. Callen in a little while.”

Clay hung up the phone, and for the first time all day, a huge smile crossed his face. The desk attendant gave him a smile and a wink. Clay went back to the phone and impatiently waited for the text. He'd listened to another two chapters when the screen flashed Logan was ready for visitors. He went up to the desk.

"Excuses me?" He held up his phone. "Logan Callen?"

The attendant typed on his computer for a few seconds. "Yes, Sir. They moved him to a surgical recovery wing. If you go down the hall and take the purple-colored elevators to floor five, you'll see the signs directing you. He's been assigned to room 578."

“Thank you.”

Clay’s feet carried him swiftly in the direction the nurse instructed. He visited a gift shop en route. Investigating the offerings, Clay searched for just the right item. There were the usual flowers, but that might be a bit too much. He saw nauseatingly cute stuffed animals and balloons that said get well, but none of them called to him either.

He was about to give up when he spied a book entitled *Hospital War Games: How to capture that extra cup of pudding*. He figured Logan would appreciate the humor. Once he paid for the souvenir, he returned to his original mission. He found Logan in his assigned room. Logan still had an IV attached to his right hand, and someone had wrapped his head like a mummy, but to Clay, he looked beautiful.

Clay quietly walked up to the bed and placed his hand on the lump of Logan’s foot ensconced under the covers. Logan’s eyes opened, meeting his. Clay squeezed the foot and mouthed, “Love you.”

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Logan smiled and crooked his finger at Clay.

Clay crossed to the side of the bed and glanced out the door to check for any imminent intruders. It looked as if the coast was clear. He bent over Logan, placing a chaste kiss on his cool lips. Their hands threaded together on Logan's mattress. Clay wanted to extend the kiss but felt they'd taken enough of a risk as it was. He pulled back and revealed his gift to Logan. He could tell Logan was trying to focus on the title of the book. Clay turned Logan's head so he could see him better.

"Dizzy?" Clay asked.

"Yeah. They said it would pass, but I feel like I'm on a never-ending carnival ride at the moment. That's why I bought myself an overnight stay. They gave me some meclizine, but it hasn't kicked in yet. Sorry if I yak on you."

"Just rest. Before you know it, we'll be on our way home."

Clay sat in the chair beside Logan's bed. He was happy to see a little smile on Logan's lips as he slipped into a restful sleep. The anti-vertigo medication was one Clay was familiar with from Logan's stash at home. One of the side effects was fatigue, but at least it helped the nausea.

The next morning, when Clay woke in the hotel bed, he reached for Logan, only to find the space beside him empty. The hospital staff hadn't allowed him to stay in Logan's room. His heart ached not having Logan beside him, but his back appreciated the thick mattress. Since he and Logan had confessed their love four months ago, he'd never slept alone. It'd only taken a couple of days before Clay craved the

warmth of Logan's body curled up next to him during the night and slumberous early morning kisses as they greeted the new day.

He jumped in the shower, eager to return to the hospital and check on his lover. When he passed the reception desk, the kid who'd checked them in was there.

"Morning, Mr. Phillips. How's your partner?"

"He's doing great. Had some minor side effects from the procedure, but everything went as planned. I'll be bringing him back here today."

"Congratulations! I don't mean to be noisy, but may I ask what he had done?"

"Logan is a veteran. He lost his hearing from a head injury while deployed. The surgery was to give him cochlear implants in both ears, so he can hear again."

"Wow. I've heard of those. Saw a Snap where this kid talked about wanting to rip his implants out of his head because they're eradicating Deaf culture."

"Yes, well, the devices aren't for everyone and people's choices should be respected. Anyway, thanks for your help."

"Tell your partner I hope everything works out."

"I will."

Clay left the hotel with a smile on his face, shaking his head at how the youth of today relied on social media to teach them about life. Logan had sat down with mentors from both the hearing and Deaf communities as part of his candidacy process. Because his loss was so sudden, Logan wasn't ready to identify as Deaf. He hungered for sound and voiced communication. He knew listening through the

cochlear implants was going to differ greatly from natural hearing, and it would take time and practice for his brain to make the connections between what he heard and associate it with meaningful information. But he was willing to put in the work. There was a fantastic support group for the hard of hearing in Boston, and they'd been to a couple of their social events. Logan had even gone to a Deaf Night Out event to experience interacting with those who communicate by sign language. Clay had learned so much about resources available, it was all a little overwhelming. He and Logan talked about signing up for an ASL class at some point in the future, but they needed to focus on this surgery and his rehabilitation first.

He pulled into the hospital campus a few minutes later and jogged through the parking area, impatient to see Logan again. When he arrived at Logan's room, he laughed at the mound of pudding cups on the wheelie table beside Logan's bed. Logan sat up in bed, reading the book Clay had left. Clay sauntered over, intent on snagging one of the cups for breakfast. However, his plan was foiled when Logan's hand slapped his away before he could pick it up off the table.

"Mine. I captured them fair and square."

Clay crossed his arms over his chest. He picked up the dry-erase board and wrote, "I gave you the guide to score your booty. That entitles me to a ten percent finder's fee."

Logan swiped the board clean and responded, "Five and a good morning kiss."

Clay took a quick peek out the door. He bent and placed a kiss on Logan's warm lips. Slipping his tongue inside the moist cavern, he tasted the flavors of previously devoured treats.

"Seems to me like you've already imbibed on some of your stash. How many have you had?"

“Only two.”

Clay arched his eyebrow.

“This morning.”

He chuckled. Confiscating one cup, he sank into the lounge chair beside the bed. He removed the cellophane covering and took the first spoonful of creamy deliciousness.

Moaning, he closed his eyes. When he opened them, he saw Logan was watching him with fire in his blue eyes.

Logan’s hand flew over the board, then he flipped it around to show Clay. “You have the same look on your face when I’m sucking you.”

Logan felt a blush creep up his cheeks. “This is yummy, but I can think of a couple of tastes that are better.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Clay was smug when he saw it was Logan's turn to blush. He knew they'd better watch the banter, but was happy to see the vitality in Logan's cheeks. They were watching a rerun of *Bones* when the doctor came in to check on Logan.

"How are you doing?" he asked, looking into Logan's eyes.

"Good."

"And the dizziness?"

"Better."

Dr. Cleary looked through the nurse's notes from overnight. He glanced over at the iPad with the caption app running. "Well, everything looks good. I'm clearing you for early activation and I'll tell the nurses to get your discharge papers ready. I look forward to seeing their reports on your progress. I'll see you in one month for a follow-up visit."

"Thank you, Dr. Cleary, for everything."

Cleary nodded. He picked up the dry erase board and scribbled. "It's my pleasure, Logan. I wish you the best of luck. It looks like you have a good partner here. I'm sure he'll be with you each step of the way. Your world is about to open up again. Cherish it and each other."

Clay read the doctor's note over Logan's shoulder, and his eyes went wide. His head flew up and caught the doctor's wink before the message was erased and the man

walked out.

He turned to see Logan's eyes just as wide and fixed on the empty door. Their gazes met. "I'll be damned."

"Yeah." Logan picked up the now clear message board. "You think he'll say anything?"

Clay shook his head and picked up the marker. "No, he seemed happy for us. I bet that's why he wrote it in erasable marker versus speaking. No evidence. Are you ready to go back to the hotel?"

Logan nodded his head enthusiastically.

A few hours later, they had Logan's discharge documents. Clay wheeled Logan out of the hospital and gingerly transferred his love to the front seat of their car. Logan was still a little unsteady on his feet but overall doing well, considering the man's head had been drilled into the day before. Clay thanked the nurses and ran to the driver's side of the car, eager to have Logan all to himself again.

Chapter Ten

For the next couple of days, they hold up in the hotel suite. With the healing incisions behind his ears, Logan didn't even want to put his hearing aids on, so he was back to a world of complete silence. Whereas before the silence was a source of pure anxiety, now Logan almost seemed peaceful. Was it because they had a scheduled time where the silence would end, or was it because Logan had worked so hard with Matt and was in a better place mentally?

They carried their smart-phones on them at all times and sent countless text messages back and forth. Everything from what they wanted for dinner to 'hand me the

remote’.

One advantage was that the time allowed Logan to concentrate on improving his lip reading skills. Clay sat with him at night and did exercises to strengthen the ability, so when activation day came, Logan would have every tool available to ease his transition back into a world of sound.

A calendar alert popped on his phone and Clay showed it to Logan. In the morning, they would head back to the VA clinic for Logan’s appointment with the audiologist.

Only in moments of solitude would Clay admit he was just as anxious as Logan. Although he tried, he knew there was no way he could really understand what it was like for Logan. The silence, the isolation, the fervent hope he lived with hour after hour that this would work. Logan had a teletherapy appointment with Matt today, and the pair had made use of the chat function for their discussion. Clay had gone down to the pool to burn off some restless energy while they met.

Clay dumped the steaming microwave popcorn in a bowl and picked up the remote control. Tonight was a night for relaxation. Logan lounged on the couch, intently looking at the screen of his e-reader.

Clay froze as Logan’s hand snaked beneath his sweats and massaged his cock, which filled out the material in a mouth-watering display. What was Logan reading? And could Clay join him?

Clay slinked his way to the end of the couch, kneeling on the floor beside the armrest. He looked over Logan’s shoulder and blinked at the words on the glowing screen. Descriptions of two men engaged in hot, erotic, explicit sex burned into his brain. He continued to read as Logan pushed the button to turn the page. Each line was devoured faster than the previous. He felt as if he were there. The author had managed with only a few paragraphs to transport him into the world of the characters

in the story.

His cock filled and throbbed in his sleep pants. His hands tingled, and his heart sped up at the visions in his head of him and Logan trading places with the characters. When the man in the story kissed his partner's neck, Clay did the same to Logan. When he twisted the hard nipples of the man in front of him, Clay snaked his hands beneath Logan's T-shirt and mimicked the action.

Logan's head fell back on the headrest, and the e-reader fell forgotten into his lap. Clay saw that the slick head of Logan's cock peeking out from the band of his sweats. He kept one hand stimulating Logan's nipples, and the other skimmed down his washboard abs to snake beneath the elastic band. Logan had made regular use of the local gym in the last few months, and his body bore the efforts.

He wrapped his hand around Logan's heated flesh, caressing it. Hot, velvety skin moved over a core of steel as he increased his strokes. His lips skimmed Logan's neck, his tongue licked the strong column. Little whimpers escaped from Logan as he nuzzled his cheek into the biceps of Clay's arm wrapped around him. Lithe hips arched up, begging for more. Logan shoved his pants down over his ass, and Clay had more room to work.

The swollen flesh in his hand steadily leaked Logan's pearly essence from the slit. Silky liquid trickled over his fingers and eased the way as Clay increased the pace of his hand. The fingers of his other hand twisted the pointed nipple he'd been playing with. The bite of pain fueled Logan's desire as his hips snapped up in demand.

Clay stood, releasing Logan's nipple, and smoothed his hand down the feverish skin of Logan's stomach. He cupped the tightly lifted balls and rolled them in the palm of his hand. His head descended over one of Logan's shoulders, and his lips attached around the nipple he'd been playing with.

One hand stripped Logan's cock, as the other stimulated the heavy orbs waiting to release their offering.

Logan's hand speared into Clay's hair, holding him in place. Clay bit down, and Logan cried out at the same time as the cock in Clay's hand erupted. Hot, creamy semen coated Clay's fingers as he milked Logan through his orgasm.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Logan lay like a zombie on the couch while the euphoria of his climax infused his body. At the moment his brain was once again capable of higher thought, he tackled Clay who'd collapsed onto the floor beside the couch. His need to give Clay pleasure fueled the fire lingering in his blood from the intense orgasm Clay had given him. Other than the dizziness immediately after surgery, Logan hadn't had experienced any roadblocks to his recovery. The modern surgical techniques minimized pain. The only irritant was some swelling at the incision sites, but over-the-counter meds took care of that. He still had the ringing ears, but Logan was so used to that he could ignore it mostly.

The days since the surgery had been some of the longest since he'd woken up in a military hospital on the other side of the world. Clay had tried so hard to make things easier, and Logan wanted to reward him.

Clay sat up, and Logan straddled his hips. Together, they pulled Clay's knit shirt over his head. Logan peppered kisses over Clay's heated skin, and his hands traced the ridges of muscle roping across Clay's torso. He pushed Clay back down to the floor and slithered down between his legs. Logan stripped Clay of his soft cotton sleep pants, then licked his lips at the sight of Clay's erection.

He crawled up Clay's body, pressing lingering kisses up the length of each leg. When he reached Clay's cock, he used just the tip of his tongue as he licked up and down the shaft. Logan lifted Clay's legs and pushed them back towards his chest, opening the body below him for his delight. His tongue swirled around the low hanging balls. The skin was as smooth and hairless as the rest of Clay's groin, except for a well-groomed patch at the top. It felt like silk and tasted of man and musk.

The heavy orbs danced inside their sac, contracting with each play of his tongue. He flattened his tongue and, in one long lick, rose to the crest of Clay's cock to circle the dripping head. His lips parted, and he took Clay into his mouth. He opened wider and sank down Clay's length until he buried his nose in Clay's crotch. Clay's unique scent tantalized his senses. He retracted then took Clay deep to the throat and just a fraction farther. The slight burn as the plum-capped head pushed into his throat was an aphrodisiac, all its own. Logan hummed and knew Clay would feel the vibrations travel up and down his cock as he sucked the steel column over and over.

Logan pulled off Clay's cock and glanced up to see of look of frustration and disappointment on Clay's face. He kissed the sensitive angles of Clay's pelvis and flicked his tongue across Clay's belly button. He inched his way up Clay's body until their lips and cocks aligned.

"I want to fuck you," Logan whispered.

Clay jumped from the couch and ran for the bathroom. He came back with the bottle of lube Logan had seen packed in his doppel kit. Clay quickly opened the cap, then squeezed out a dollop of liquid.

Logan braced his hands on either side of Clay's body, clenching his teeth as Clay reached between their bodies to slick up Logan's cock. He panted as Clay's fingers played on his skin and dipped down low to tickle the sensitive patch of skin behind his nuts. He knew if Clay hadn't gotten him off a little while ago, he would have blown at that very moment.

Logan held out his hand, and Clay squirted out some lube onto his fingers. The thin low pile carpet pressed against his knees, but he didn't care. Clay's legs lifted and braced themselves on his shoulders. When Logan touched the skin around Clay's hole, the stormy gray eyes closed and slim hips lifted.

Logan eased one finger inside Clay. He progressed to two, then fucked Clay's entrance. Clay sought greater depth by pushing into Logan's touch, and he obliged by pressing as deep as he could, curling his fingers to stimulate Clay's gland. He scissored his digits, spreading the tight tissues of Clay's channel.

His cock throbbed with need, and Logan removed his fingers from their snug, hot tunnel. He fit the head of his cock to Clay's rim and held his breath as he canted his hips, penetrating an inch. After pausing for a moment to relish the snug heat of Clay's body, Logan impaled Clay completely. He watched as Clay's mouth formed the word 'more' and his hips danced beneath Logan, seeking a harder, deeper possession.

"You want more?"

Clay's head nodded

"You want to get fucked?"

Clay's eyes flared; the storm clouds flashed in need.

Logan eased back, savoring the licks of sensation that danced along his shaft. Clay's hands clutched Logan's forearms, his mouth parted as Logan felt the pants of breath on his lips when he bent to place a kiss. Clay's body was nearly bent in half, and yet, the man looked as if he craved more.

The position forced Clay's hips up from the floor, and Logan shoved a pillow they'd left on the sofa beneath to keep them that way. In one hard thrust, Logan speared Clay with his cock. Despite not hearing the scream that came from Clay's mouth, Logan felt its effect deep within his heart. He increased his speed, pounding strokes intent on claiming Clay's ass. Being inside his love was like no other experience in the world. Even the adrenaline rush of combat didn't compare.

Clay's legs dropped and spread wider as he perched one on the sofa and the other on the coffee table. Logan watched his cock slide in and out of Clay's ass. The wet, hot and tight tissues milked his shaft. Fire raced under his skin, and a massive orgasm pooled at the base of his spine. His muscles contracted as the tension in his body mounted. He needed Clay to come first. He had to give his lover that gift.

Clay's head thrashed on the floor, obviously in the throes of his own sexual frenzy. It wasn't enough. Clay had to give more. Logan had to know that Clay acknowledged his possession.

He alone held a claim on Clay's body. He alone claimed Clay's heart.

"Come for me, Clay. Give me what's mine."

He adjusted the angle of his cock and slammed hard. Instantly, white hot ribbons spurted from Clay's cock. Clay's body convulsed, and the creamy jets covered his abdomen and chest. The intensity of the orgasm tightened his sheath and sent Logan hurtling over the edge. His nerve endings exploded, and his brain went numb as euphoria swamped his entire existence. He emptied his soul into Clay and begged the heavens that the man would keep it safe.

Chapter Eleven

As Logan entered the doors of the West Haven Medical Center, half of him was jumping out of his skin with excitement and the other was shriveling in terror.

The drive over from the hotel that morning had been tense. He'd woken up before sunrise and immediately grabbed his phone to search first-person accounts of 'activation day'. The first thing the audiologist would do was test each electrode and find the point where his nerve responded. He'd read that it might sound like a phone ringing. After they completed that for both implants, the audiologist would

effectively ‘turn him on’.

It seemed odd that many people said the initial sounds seemed mechanical or like a duck, but what did he know about brain processing? Many of the accounts focused on children or people who’d been deaf since birth, so it was difficult to get an accurate portrayal of someone like him who’d lost their hearing suddenly.

Clay walked beside him as they made their way down the sterile white hallway—Clay always walked beside him in everything. How had he gotten so lucky to find a man who loved all parts of him? The good, the bad and the ugly.

They arrived at the door to the audiology department. Logan took a deep breath, and Clay’s warm hand squeezed his shoulder in support. Tremors seized Logan’s hand as he turned the handle and entered the office.

They checked in at the reception, then sat in the waiting area. Logan found he couldn’t sit still, so he paced and scrolled on his phone. He soon saw his audiologist, Erin, enter the room.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Erin waved. "Hi Logan. Come on back."

He and Clay followed. Logan saw Clay's lips moving, but couldn't read them well. He supposed Erin and Clay were chatting. This had to be the longest hallway on the face of the planet. When they entered the office, he saw a table full of equipment. His feet came to a halt as he stared.

"It's okay," Erin said as she squeezed his shoulder. "I know it looks like a lot, but we're only working with a couple of pieces today."

He could read Erin's lips fairly well. Logan supposed she was used to working with people who couldn't hear, so she spoke slowly and faced them. He nodded and his feet unglued themselves from the floor. Logan's eyes zeroed in on the two processors innocently perched in their cases. Those small devices would change his life. If they worked, he would no longer think of himself as one of the thousand broken men who'd returned home from hell, but a survivor. Sure, he had a few bumps and bruises, but his life would once again belong to him. Erin unlocked a tablet and started a conversation caption application.

"Mr. Callen, are you ready?"

He nodded

She turned to see Clay standing behind her. Erin said something to Clay, but Logan didn't have a good view. At first, he thought she was telling Clay to leave but let out a relieved breath when Clay sat in the chair beside him. He could read Clay's lips and see his expressions. Logan wouldn't face this alone.

Logan sat and stole a glance at Clay. Clay gave him a little wink, and his nerves settled somewhat. He chastised himself at his earlier thought because he knew Clay would always be there. Logan once again focused on Erin, sitting across the table from him.

"Okay, so the first thing I want to do is check your incision sites. Since we are doing early activation, I expect there is still some swelling, which is normal, but I want to make sure there is no sign of infection."

"We've been putting the ointment on them and Logan hasn't complained of any pain," Clay said

"That's great. Let's take a peak."

Erin walked around the table and Logan remained still while she palpated the spots behind his ears where Dr. Cleary had cut. The flaps of his ears were still a bit numb but when he'd taken the bandages off and looked at them in the mirror, both ears looked just like they always had. He'd also explored his scalp to locate the magnet, but his thick hair obscured it.

Erin came back around and smiled. "They look fantastic. Now we'll figure out what strength magnet to start with. We might adjust this as the swelling goes down. I'm going to place the headpiece on your scalp. You may feel a little click when the two magnets find each other, but there won't be any sound. I promise I'll tell you before we put sound through the processors."

"We both read the procedure outline you sent home with us," Logan said.

"That's great, but I know there are probably a lot of emotions flying around the room right now, and it's hard to remember details. So I like to make sure I tell you each step as we move forward."

Logan watched Clay thank Erin.

“Let’s get started.”

Logan sat still as Erin attached the magnets to his scalp, where the implants rested beneath the skin. Huh, it was higher up and closer to his ear than he'd thought. Maybe only a couple of inches away. He'd chosen a black casing so the devices would blend in with his hair. Although he'd seen a bunch of people online who got wraps and stickers with fun designs. He might do that in the future. Why not have some fun with the whole thing?

When she secured the processors, it surprised Logan how light they were. He definitely felt them, especially the magnet resting on the side of his head, but the overall presence didn't feel like the giant satellite dishes he'd expected.

“Okay, Logan, we’re going to check the impedances of the electrodes. You don’t need to do anything, but you may hear some beeping sounds or there could be a tingling sensation. You can talk if you want.”

He couldn't talk. He was too focused on listening for every little sound. Perhaps something existed there? He wasn't sure. Logan locked eyes with Clay, desperate for some connection to the world outside his head.

"You're doing great, Logan. Since they took the nerve conduction measurements in the OR, I'm going to use that to set your first map. When I turn them on, the sounds will be soft at first, then we'll raise them until speech is loud but comfortable for you."

He closed his eyes. Oh God ... oh God... please let this work. When he opened his eyes, he caught Erin's mouth moving, but only the last bit, so he didn't understand what she'd said. He looked at Clay for clarification. Clay squeezed his hand.

Logan saw Erin gesture with her hand, and he jolted when he heard a light buzzing sound. He wasn't sure what that was. Were the units on? Seeking confirmation, he looked into Clay's eyes. He watched Clay's lips move, but there was no sound. His heart raced and Logan feared he was about to hyperventilate, but then the buzzing got louder. He tilted his head and closed his eyes to focus on the buzzing sound. The buzzing transformed into a cadence of vaguely robotic sounds. Then...

"Logan?"

Clay squeezed his hand, and Logan whipped his head around to stare at his love.

"I want to say something profound, but can only sit here admire how brave you are."

It's Clay! That's Clay's voice! It sounds a little artificial, but that's Clay!

He watched Clay's lips move and heard. He actually understood the words. For the first time since that fateful day that'd changed his life, he'd heard Clay's voice. Moisture pooled in his eyes and spilled over. With the beauty of sound restored, and the enormity of all he'd lost since the explosion, of all he'd taken for granted before, poured forth.

Clay's face was a mirror of rioting emotions. Logan wanted to leap across the room into his love's arms. Erin sat calmly in the chair across the table with a smile on her face. A box of tissues appeared, and he mopped the tears trickling from the corners of his eyes. Here he was a battle hardened Ranger, and the simple presence of his lover's voice had him crying.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Once he composed himself, he noticed other sounds around him. They kinda sounded like beeps, sweeps, and creeps, but he'd been assured that was normal at first. It would take his brain a little while to rewire itself and match those beeps and creeps into meaningful information. He had time on his side though. He was one of the fortunate few who'd been deaf for less than a year. That meant that the brain would remember quicker, and he would supposedly adapt much faster than someone who'd been lost their hearing many years ago.

There was some kind of trilling noise and Logan swung his head around, trying to identify the sound, then he heard a rumbling sound from his left. He turned to look and saw Clay's lips moving. He focused on Clay's face.

"Logan, what do you hear?"

"I hear?"

Wait! What is that? Holy Crap!

"I hear ... me! I hear my voice again."

He saw Erin hang up the phone on the desk. That noise must have been the phone ringing. Weird.

"What does your voice sound like, Logan?" Erin asked.

"It sounds ... Hello? Hello? Can I hear me now?" He snickered at his lame attempt at a joke, then turned to Erin. "I sound kinda like a pubescent alien. Like I've sucked on

helium or something.”

“That’s totally normal. We’re going to do some more adjustments, then I’ll see you again tomorrow. If you feel anxious or get a headache, it’s okay to take the processors off for a little while. We’re bombarding the brain with a lot of information right now, and it might get stressed out.”

Logan was still in shock that he could understand most of what Erin had just said, so he just nodded dumbly. An hour later, he and Clay left the medical campus and headed back to their hotel. The second they stepped outside the doors, he stopped dead, looking around in amazement. He’d forgotten all the unique sounds outside. There was a buzz and the sight of a car pulling away from a parking spot caught his attention. He picked up a chirping sound when they walked beneath a tree where a bird sat in the branches singing.

“Logan?”

He turned his head at Clay’s voice and smiled. “Yes?” Clay swallowed when Logan responded.

“Are you hungry?”

“Sure. Can we pickup something and take it back to the room?”

“Absolutely.”

Logan couldn’t stop smiling as they made it back to their hotel with bags of fast food. Once again secure in their little haven, the first thing Logan did was turn on the TV. He heard noises, but it was difficult to understand the dialogue.

Hmm, that’s a lot harder than understanding people. I’ll have to keep using the closed

captions for a while.

The TV screen went black, and Logan turned to see Clay standing beside the bed with the remote in his hand.

“What’d you do that for?”

Okay, my voice is still a little weird, but not quiet as chipmunkie.

“Come here, Logan.”

He walked toward Clay, and when they were only inches apart, Clay secured him within the circle of his arms.

Clay leaned back and made sure Logan was watching him. “Logan Callen, I am so proud of you and ... I love you.”

The tears started flowing again. He’d heard the words. There wasn’t a screen between them acting as an impersonal translator. Clay had said them before. He’d said them a lot over the last few months, but Logan had sensed more than heard the words. He’d seen Clay’s love, he’d felt that love, he’d eagerly tasted Clay’s love, but now ... now all the sounds associated with Clay’s love were available and Logan found his vision wavering and his lip trembled.

Clay’s arms wrapped around him and pulled him close. Their bodies pressed tightly together as he crumbled, overcome by all the fear, all the anxiety and all the frustration he’d lived with not only since the explosion but since he came to live at the Shelby’s house when he first met Clay. Clay’s presence, his friendship and now his love laid the stones on his path to healing. He clutched at Clay’s back as his lover’s hands soothed him. When the tears dried up and the trembles calmed, he swiped at the wetness coating his cheeks.

“I love you, too, Clay. I love you ... so much.”

Their lips met softly at first, but the tender connection quickly flared into bright, passionate need. Their tongues twisted and twined together. In warm waves, they lapped against each other, searching for the mingled taste that unified them.

Logan’s head swam. He was adrift in a sea of thoughts and emotions. The only thing serving as anchor was Clay’s touch. He spun Clay around, and their bodies mimicked the freefall of his mind until cushioned by the mattress. Clay expelled a harsh breath as Logan’s weight collided on top of him. Logan gripped Clay underneath his arms and used his leverage to arrange their position lengthwise on the bed.

“Jesus, Logan. I’m not your rag doll,” Clay cursed before resuming their kiss.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Logan forcibly halted the response, steamrolling through his system. Clay lay beneath him. Logan's kisses had swollen Clay's lips; desire clouded his eyes; and beneath Logan's hand, Clay's heart pounded like a thoroughbred at Churchill Downs. This man's heart belonged to him. Clay's kiss warmed his blood, and his touch healed Logan's soul.

Without Clay, Logan would have slipped into nothingness after his discharge. He'd come so close to losing himself within the pity and pain. Only with Clay's support had he had the courage to fight against the anxiety, terror, and guilt. Only in Clay's arms had he come home again.

"Not a rag doll, no. But definitely mine. Of that you can be absolutely certain."

Clay wrapped his hand around Logan's neck and pulled him close so their foreheads touched. "I've been yours for twenty years, Logan. All you had to do was claim me."

Logan's breath stalled in his lungs. He knew Clay spoke of not only when he'd run away, but the years before as well. He slid off Clay's body and lay next to him. They turned on their sides to face each other. Logan scrunched up his face as the microphones of his processors scraped across the pillow. He propped his head up on one hand and rested the other on Clay's hip.

"I guess it's time to talk about what was going on in my head back then."

"You know I'll listen, if you wanna talk. But I don't need to hear it."

"I think I need to say it. I've talked a lot about my childhood and its effects with

others. First, DFC and the assigned therapists in the group home, then Matt, but I've never told you the entire story." He caressed the side of Clay's face. The rasp of his unshaven face scrapped across his palm. "The one person who means the most knows the least, and that's not right."

"Would it help if I told you what I do know and you can fill in the blanks?"

Logan shrugged. He didn't know if anything would make this easier. Maybe if I just start from the beginning.

So he did. He told Clay everything he'd shared with Matt and a few details more. Clay's hand landed on his hip and Logan used the touch as a center. He wouldn't allow himself to slip further into the darkness.

"When the police showed up at the hospital, I was barely conscious. I laid in that ER by myself, bloody and broken until time ceased to matter. Some social worker came by occasionally, but I mostly ignored her. I know she was only doing her job and trying to be helpful, but I just didn't have the mental capacity to engage. They eventually moved me to a room, and the cops came back. I gave a statement, and they arrested my dad for the assault."

"Did you tell them about the abuse, too?"

Logan shook his head. "Not then. It all eventually came out. They subjected me to head-to-toe exams. I was required to give blood and hair samples. It was ... humiliating."

Clay leaned in and gave Logan a soft kiss. They shifted around so Logan could rest his head on Clay's chest. He couldn't see Clay's face anymore, but maybe that was a good thing for this part.

"The cops came back, and I had to answer every question you can imagine. When did it start? How often did it happen? What did he do to me? They pulled up the report on my mother's death. That started a whole new set of questions. You should have seen the cops' faces when I described to them exactly what my mom looked like when I found her body. It had been years, and I still recalled the smell of her blood and how cold her skin felt on my fingers when I tried to shake her awake. Anyway, when I was strong enough to leave the hospital, DFC moved me into the group home. That's where I camped out until they moved me over to Carol and Jack's."

Logan felt Clay's chest rumble, and he heard his voice, but didn't quite understand the words. He lifted his head. "Can you say that again? I heard you, but guess my super-ears need a bit more of a workout before they're effective."

"You never really talked about your experience in the group home. What was it like? I never spent time in one after I entered the system."

Logan shrugged. "Not bad. Not great either. The staff did their best, but I always felt like it was a holding pen for the kids that even foster parents didn't want or, like in my case, had issues that made them unplaceable. I didn't make any friends, but then again, I didn't care to try. When I landed in the Shelby's, I had no expectations of anything changing. Then I met you."

He sat up to lean against the padded headboard attached to the wall and met Clay's gaze. They had darkened, and Logan saw the riot of emotions swirling in their gray depths. Clay's eyes so often reminded him of thunderstorm clouds, the intensity brewing before the atmosphere broke, the snap and crackle as they unleashed their awesome power and finally the calm after the storm. When they made love, Logan used Clay's eyes as a barometer. Without being able to hear, Logan used every available means to judge where Clay was during the experience. The energy in Clay's eyes consistently told Logan all he needed to know.

He bent over and gave Clay a kiss.

“The first day, you came skidding into the Shelby’s kitchen in your socks with your backpack still slung over your shoulder. Carol had just placed a plate of cookies and milk in front of me. You snagged one off the plate, and she yelled at you. The biggest smile I’d ever seen on another human being came across your face, and you said?”

“Brothers always share,” Clay finished.

Logan nodded. “Your smile unlocked something inside me that day. Something I’d forgotten. I remembered what it meant to be a kid, and the deadly duo was born,” Logan said, smiling.

“The two of us came to the Shelby’s with demons on our backs. In my case, my dad mostly forgot or ignored my existence after my mom split. The only time he addressed me was when he ordered me to go get him some more Jack or hit me when I got in his way while he had his drunk on. Social services were called when I passed out at school during gym class because I hadn’t eaten in a few days. I was lucky. The Shelby’s house was my first placement. When you came along, I figured my prayers had been answered. Not only had fate brought me a brother, but a best friend.”

“When did it change for you?”

“Nothing changed, Logan. It just deepened. I started looking forward to your smiles and your touches, no matter how innocent. I started dreaming of something more, but because of where you’d come from, I knew it’d never happen. When you ran, I thought my confession had turned you against me. I thought you saw me as your father.”

“No, Clay, I ran because ... because you said we could never be together. I thought you had caught on to my feelings and were too disgusted by my past to ever want what

was left of me.” Logan saw the hurt and confusion in Clay’s eyes. “In my mind, the most logical solution was escape.”

“I thought you said you ran because you weren’t ready to deal with having a sexual relationship?”

“That’s also true. What can I say? I was screwed up.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

"I need you to know I have never placed the blame for your father's sickness on you. You always have been and always will be my best friend. Now, you're my lover and partner. Together, we will confront any future demons. Neither of us will be alone ever again."

Clay picked at the comforter on the bed, and Logan knew something brewed in the man's brain. "What?"

"I want to ask you a question, but I know you've had a big day and ... I'm not sure now is the time."

"Clay, you've practically put your entire life on the back burner to deal with my issues this year. The least I can do is answer a question, assuming I have an answer."

Clay sat up and faced Logan. He curled his legs up and wrapped his arms around his shins. Whatever Clay wanted to ask, the man was protecting himself from the potential answers. Logan swallowed and his pulse sped up.

"Is there someone out there we need to call? A teammate? A best friend? A ... a loved one?"

Logan frowned. "What do you mean? You're the only man I've ever loved."

A tiny grin appeared on Clay's lips then disappeared. "But you've lived your entire adult life outside our bubble. You laughed, cried, cursed, and bled with a team of men and women I know nothing about. And I know I'm not the only man you've slept with." He raised his hand. "I'm not asking for your black book entries, or maybe I

should say Grinder app swipe history. But you were gone for sixteen years. Surely you replaced me with someone? Someone who is worried about you? What about that guy who called me to say you were flying back to Georgia?"

Oh. Oh, fuck. Clay didn't know.

How was he supposed to know if you never told him? Youdipshit!

Logan took Clay's hand. "I didn't know him. When I landed at Ft. Benning, I stopped the first guy I saw and handed him a note asking him to call you and why. I'd been discharged. I had nowhere to go, and the idea of taking off into the world alone without being able to hear or support myself was more terrifying than facing you. So yeah, no idea who he was."

"I just assumed he was one of your team. He seemed really worried about you on the phone."

Logan shrugged.

"So where is your squad or platoon? Sorry, I'm not sure of the right words. The men and women at the station who are former military always talk about how close they are with those they served, even years later."

"In some sense, I suppose I'll always be a part of the Ranger family, but you have to understand at any point there are probably 1800 Rangers running around the world. It's like when we were at UMass. We didn't know all the people in our classyear. I was part of the 75th Ranger Regiment, 1st Battalion, D Company. There were 150 of us. You can break us down further into squads. Of the nine men and women of my squad ... there's only three left, including me."

"Jesus," Clay whispered.

He looked at Clay. "One of the six killed that day ... the day this happened," he said, pointing to his head. "Was Brian Adams. And yes, we gave him hell for his name. Brian is ... was my best friend. My occasional lover. We had a friends with benefits sort of arrangement. And while nobody,nobodycould have ever replaced you in my life, Adams made it a little less empty. Now he's gone. They're almost all gone. And those that are left, have moved on with their lives. So to answer your question, no, there is nobody we need to call." He picked up Clay's hand. "You were the center of my world before I ran away, and I was lost for a long time, but I've found my way back to you. The men and women of your inner circle have become my new squad, and while I know there are days, it doesn't seem like it. Please know that I am so grateful for their friendship. Now that I can hear again, I hope I become a participant rather than just an observer to all your craziness. I miss that. I miss being part of a unit, a ... a family."

Clay bounced into Logan's arms and kissed him. Logan tightened his arms around Clay and held tight. He closed his eyes and sighed. His head hurt. It seemed his brain was more out of shape than he'd thought. When Erin had told him earlier that he might want to take off the processors for a few hours, he'd figured she was nuts. Why would he want to take away the sounds he'd prayed for? But now, he felt his pulse in the back of his head and wanted nothing more than to close out the world for a little while.

Clay smoothed his hand over Logan's head. "You're hurting, aren't you? Why don't you take them off for a little while andrest? Thank you Logan. Thank you for sharing that part of yourself with me."

Logan nodded and smiled. Somehow he felt lighter, having told clay about Adams. Clay slid off the bed. He dug around in the backpacks Erin had sent them home with, and grabbed the cases for his processors. Logan removed them from his head and handed them to Clay. The silence was immediate, and Logan's brain quit crackling. He observed Clay disconnect the batteries and set processors on the nightstand, then

disappear into the bathroom. Logan lay back with his eyes closed.

A few moments later, the film of light behind his eyelids darkened. Clay's hand landed on his shoulder, and he opened his eyes to find the curtains over the window shut. Clay stood beside him with a glass of water and two tablets in his palm. Logan took the painkillers and relaxed against the pillows. Clay crawled onto the bed behind him and gathered him close. Clay's hand rested above his heart, and a soft kiss landed on the back of his neck. Slowly, his consciousness slipped away, and as he crossed over into the oblivion of sleep, a smile curved over his lips.

Chapter Twelve

Clay tilted back his head and inhaled the fragrant air of the first warm spring day. Around him Magnolia trees bloomed up and down Commonwealth Avenue. The crème and raspberry colors were a perfect foil for the brownstones lining the street in the Back Bay neighborhood.

He welcomed the change in seasons with open arms. It had been a long winter, and he was so ready for sunlight. He wanted to run without dirty snow slush splashing his sneakers, and he wanted to spend nights down on the waterfront eating ice cream cones, laughing at Logan's lewd antics as he licked the cool treat.

Logan had recently returned from another mapping session with Erin and seemed to respond to the changes in his processor settings well. His progress in the five months since activation was astonishing. His last test scores showed Logan heard environmental sounds the same as someone with only a slight hearing loss and understood almost eighty percent of words using both ears. Besides the miraculous improvements in Logan's speech understanding, his lover's dependency on the PTSD prescriptions had significantly reduced. Logan's anxiety seemed to ebb and flow, but was less pervasive and debilitating. He still had flashbacks and occasional nightmares, but Clay could say with absolute certainty that Logan was a changed man

from the person he'd brought home a year ago.

He and Logan communicated with little difficulty at home. Every once in a while, he might ask Clay to repeat a word or his answer might be a little off from the original question. One afternoon, not too long ago, the two of them had almost laughed themselves to death at one such error...

Clay spied Logan come out of the bedroom and naturally his gaze zeroed in on his crotch. He smiled. "Hey baby, check your zipper."

Logan made a face at Clay. He'd turned toward the bedroom and scratched the back of his head. "Clay, I don't have any slippers."

He paused for a second then snickered. Clay closed in on where Logan stood, still looking confused. He slid his hand between the edges of the gap in Logan's shorts and fondled his cock for a moment. He rolled the warm weight in his hand, and Logan moaned. The thick flesh stiffened and Clay placed a soft kiss on Logan's lips. He pulled his hand out and Logan frowned. "I said zipper."

Clay's cock twitched at the memory, and his foot pressed a little harder on the accelerator. Turning onto Arlington, he spied a car leaving a parking spot along the street. He zoomed his compact into the space with a move worthy of the best Hollywood stunt driver. He locked the car and dashed into the park.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Others filled Boston Common, enjoying the sunny weekend. Sunday Funday called for an afternoon of ultimate Frisbee. Most of the gang was supposed to be here today for the tournament. Rick, Conor, Vic, Chase, Ryan, Ethan, Logan and he joined a weekend warrior league. Logan and Clay had tried to get Matt to join them too, but Matt had declined their invitation. Calleigh and Miranda sometimes came but typically hung out on the sidelines, cheering and harassing their husbands. Clay like the exercise, but honestly he joined to he'd have a built in excuse to see all his friends regularly.

He saw the guys all standing in a small circle. The sun reflected off Logan's black head, and Clay sprinted the last ten meters as the desire racing through his blood reached desperate levels. He latched onto Logan's waist, but before he could move, he got spun around in pure Jason Statham style. Logan's lips attached to his. Large hands cupped his ass and lifted him off the ground. His tongue plunged into the warm, inviting recess and tangoed with Logan's. Clay's feet wrapped around Logan's calves, and he held on for dear life as reality spun away.

Jeez, Logan's gotten strong.

The hours spent in the gym had transformed Logan's solid frame into a sculpture of perfection. With his body pressed intimately against each thickly roped muscle, especially the one hardening against him, Clay couldn't be happier. Cat calls coming from his fellow teammates rained all around them.

"All right, you guys, break it up," Ryan said.

"Rick, ye got that bottle of ice water?" Conor asked.

The kiss ended with a lingering lick to Logan's lips. Once Clay got his feet back under him, he said, "How did you know?"

Logan smiled. "Ethan ratted you out."

Clay gave Ethan a little shove. "You snake. See if I help you surprise Ryan next Valentine's Day."

Ethan snorted. "A strategic diversion isn't exactly on par with a full body tackle. Besides, I didn't want you to hurt yourself. With the way Logan's looking these days, you would've bounced off his butt like a quarter and ended up on yours. Therefore, in actuality, I was looking out for you."

"And the defense rests, your honor," Rick teased.

"Cute. Except I'm a prosecutor, not a defense attorney. I nail the bad guys, not get them off."

"I don't know. I've heard Ryan appreciates your skills at getting men off," Clay retorted.

Ethan rolled his eyes.

"How juvenile," Conor said, haughtily.

"So says the man who plays video games for a living?" Logan asked.

"Ara be whist. I design games, ye muzzy! Not play them."

Clay raised his eyebrow. He'd been to Rick and Conor's home when they'd had one of their marathon video game tournaments.

“Well, I donna only play. Besides, that’s called quality control. Every game ‘as ter be tested before gonna market. Donna look only te me. He’s just as bad,” Conor said, pointing to Rick.

Clay snaked an arm around Logan’s waist. He’d missed the banter and teasing between their friends. Winter had found most of them snuggled down in their homes, relishing the shared body warmth between their respective lovers. Or in Rick and Conor’s case, the zoo they called home, whose four walls they shared with Calleigh their wife, twin four-year-old boys and a ten-month-old daughter.

“Hey!”

Clay turned to see Jack, one of the other detectives from his precinct, with his hands up in the air.

"Are you ladies finished gabbing? Can we play Frisbee now? I go on shift at three."

“Yeah, Yeah. We’re coming,” he shouted back.

“You will be,” Logan whispered in Clay’s ear.

Clay shivered with need and turned to see the heat from their kiss still lingering in Logan’s deep blue eyes.

"Hey wait a second. Where's Vic and Chase?" He looked at Ryan. "I thought you said they'd be here. We need Chase's leaping ability."

"Miranda got called into the hospital. They're on daddy duty." Ryan said.

"So bring the Rugrat. Some fresh air would benefit her."

Rick shrugged, and Clay grumbled. Granted, he didn't have kids. Never planned on having them either, but how hard could it be to still hang with friends and babysit? Wait, was it still babysitting if you're the dad? Clay saw the referee walk onto the play area and blow his whistle. Logan winced at the harsh sound, and Clay rubbed his back.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

"Welcome to the ultimate in Ultimate—where athleticism meets confusion, and sweat meets sunscreen. Teams you have two minutes to huddle and remember, no food on the pitch. That means you Jack! I see that snack pack."

"All right folks. Huddle up." Rick said.

Rick was the de facto captain of their squad of misfits. The weekly recreational league comprised men and women from around the greater Boston area. Since a lot of the league members had full-time jobs or young families the roster changed as often as the turbulent spring weather. Clay thought the different combinations of players kept it fresh and friendly. Experience varied widely. Some players had taken part in organized sport before and others had never seen an official field. Out of their group, Rick, Conor, and Ethan had played soccer for Boston College. Ryan played for an alphabet agency hockey league over the winter. Clay and Logan did high school sports and Clay did some intramural stuff in college, but that was a long time ago.

"Alright team, remember—no actual tackling. Or screaming. Or crying this time, Ethan."

"Hey! That goose came out of nowhere! I'm still in therapy."

"Yes, I know that foul, fouled you."

"Ye'r prowess on the pitch is renowned, Grapenuts. "

Ethan flipped off Conor.

Clay snickered, and Logan glanced at him with a look of confusion. "Later," he mouthed.

"We're going to run a mailman."

"Can I be the grandma?" Ryan asked.

"Sure, you've got the best long range accuracy out of the group."

"Logan, you're the mailman. Use those Ranger skills and run to the end-zone like your ass is on fire."

Logan nodded, and Clay gave him a wink. Logan made a kissy face back at him.

Rick snapped his fingers in front of Clay. "Canoodle on your own time. Right now, your ass is mine."

"Your wife might have something to say about that." Clay looked at Conor. "Or Maybe Conor might like to take a walk on the wild side."

A silent, meaningful look passed between Rick and Conor; then Ethan shot up from the huddle, his mouth opening, only to be yanked back down by Ryan's swift, silencing hand. "Kindly proceed."

"Thanks, Ryan." Rick looked right at Clay. "You, Conor, Ethan, and I will be the grandkids. Conor you start the call out. Use as much Irish nonsense as possible to confuse the hell out of them."

Conor rubbed his hands and cackled. "Aye, de feckin' eeeeejits won't know what ta do."

"Players take your positions!" The ref called out.

They lined up in a vert stack. Logan in the front, and Clay got right behind him, followed by Ryan and the rest, lining up single file.

The ref blew his whistle and Logan took off. His legs and arm pumping with a diving force as if he were competing in the Olympic 100-meter sprint.

"Run ye' deaf bastard! Ahh, g'wan! G'wan, g'wan, g'wan g'wan!"

One player on the opposite team whipped around and scowled at Conor.

"What?" He yelled. "He is deaf. Canny ye see them antenna sticking out of de side oh his head? Don't shame me for shaming the gammy gobshite!"

It took everything in Clay not to bust out laughing at the indignation on their opponent's face. Of course, he knew Conor was trying to distract them and rile them up.

"Go Logan! Get to the end-zone, here it comes!" Rick yelled.

The others on the team kept yelling out encouragement, but remained in the stack. The play aimed to convince the other team Logan was going straight to the end-zone to score. But Clay watched as Logan screeched to a halt and looked over his shoulder. Ryan flung the disc, then took off toward Logan. The other team scrambled as they tried to intercept the slicing plastic saucer. Logan cut toward Ryan and snatched the disc about ten yards before the goal line as the defensive men for the other team ran right past him. Clay, Rick, Ethan, and Conor all took off and blitzed the end-zone in different directions. Now the opponents did not know where the frisbee was going. Logan flung the disc directly into Clay's hands.

"Point!" the referee yelled out.

Clay ran over and jumped into Logan's arms. "Brilliant, baby."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

The rest of the team joined in the celebration.

Conor put his hand on Logan's shoulder. "Ye' know I'm only coddin' ya, right? Your implants are amazing and I know yer excited about de progress ye' made."

Logan pulled his smartphone out of the zipper pocket in his shorts. He tapped on the screen, then held it up to Conor. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. I have this really cool feature that mutes annoying Irishmen."

Clay was so glad Logan could laugh about his hearing. Some days he still seethed with frustration and anger towards the world for not understanding how difficult it was to navigate the hearing world. But giving Conor hell back was another sign of the improvement in his mental health.

Two hours and five games later, Clay tilted back and poured a bottle of water over his head, the cool liquid a balm to his heated skin. Man, that tourney had taken it out of him. It seemed he needed to increase the cardiovascular component of his workout. He'd thought he was in decent shape, but Logan stood next to him, barely winded. The sweat glistened on Logan's bare chest, and Clay inhaled his musky scent. He wanted to tackle Logan to the ground and lick the man from head to toe.

When Clay's tired gaze sought Logan's, his lover actually smirked, until his eyes traveled down Clay's body and caught sight of his cock thickening behind his jersey shorts. Logan's nostrils flared, and his eyes darkened to mimic the blue of a deep Caribbean lagoon. Their moment was shattered when Jack came up behind Logan and slapped him on the back.

“So, Logan, what are you going to do now? Any job prospects on the horizon? I mean, the Army’s done with you, right?”

Clay winced. The Army's swift rejection after the attack continued to wound Logan.

Logan nodded. “I’m through. Actually, I recently completed my certification to become a firearm and tool mark examiner. I’m fishing for a position at headquarters in the lab but, so far, no bites.”

“Do you have a degree?” Jack asked.

“Yeah. I completed my B.S. in Criminal Justice online while I was a Ranger.”

“That’s great. I can definitely see you as an asset to the department with your background and experience. Tell you what, let me put out a few feelers from the inside.”

“I’d appreciate that, Jack.”

“Me, too, McCormick,” Clay added.

Jack nodded at Clay. “You’re a good cop, Phillips, and I figure if He-Man here can put up with your shit then he’s gotta be a stand-up guy. That’s all I need to know.”

“Thanks ... I think,” Logan responded.

“Clay! Logan! You two up for beer and pizza?” Ryan called out.

Clay waved then turned to Jack. “I’ll see you at the station tomorrow.”

“Have a good night off, you SOB. Eat a slice for me, will ya?”

Clay nudged Logan. “He-man here can put away a few extra in your name. I’m going on a damn diet. You guys nearly killed me out there today.”

“It’s okay, Clay. The years were bound to catch up to you eventually,” Logan teased.

“We’re the same age!”

“Nah, you’ve got a good six months on me.”

Clay humphed. “I didn’t hear you complaining about my stamina the other night.”

“And with that over share, I’ll say sayonara,” Jack stated.

Clay watched Jack’s back as the man bolted away from them. He turned to Logan, and the two of them broke out in riotous laughter. When he caught his breath, he caught Logan’s gaze and started snickering once again.

“I’m sorry ... I’m sorry. It’s not that funny. I can’t seem to help myself. Jack’s ... he’s just so—” More laughter erupted from Clay.

Ethan ran up to Clay and Logan. “Why is a hyena impersonating one of my best friends?”

“We dropped a little sexual tidbit during some harmless banter in front of Jack, and the man hot footed away like Yosemite Sam with his pants on fire.”

“Ah-huh. Well, anyway, we’re all heading over to Gino’s for pizza and beer. You two in?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“Sure.” Logan grabbed Clay’s hand. “Come on, giggles.”

Clay cut off Logan’s path and walked backwards. “Don’t stuff yourself too much, babe. I have plans for you later tonight.”

Logan captured Clay, eliminating the distance between their bodies. “Think you’ll be up for it old man?”

Clay wrapped his arms around Logan’s neck and arched into the damp, hot skin that had been teasing him all afternoon. “Oh, I can guarantee I’ll be up for it. In fact—”

Logan silenced Clay with a deep kiss. Clay wrapped his arms around Logan and squeezed his ass. Clay’s blood pressure climbed as they played all afternoon. The fast-paced game hadn’t been the only thing making his breath race. Each time, Logan had leapt to snatch the flailing disc from midair, Clay had glimpsed the rippled abs and bulging quads in his toned body.

He’d been all set to take Logan home and fuck him within an inch of his life, but now, he had to play nice. Pizza and beer with their friends was always entertaining, but there were times when a man just wanted to lock the door and screw his lover through the mattress all night long. Logan had better enjoy his respite because tonight his ass belonged to Clay.

They sat in a large circled booth at Gino’s towards the back of the restaurant. Their laughter had made more than one head turn as they shared stories over fire-grilled pizza and pitchers of brew. Logan was convinced his new friends were trying to kill him. He’d nearly shot beer out his nose when he’d heard Rick and Conor tell the tale

of how Ethan had gotten the nickname ‘grape-nuts’ and choked on his chicken pesto pizza when Ethan had retaliated by informing the group about the first few times the two men had explored their need for ménage. Some descriptions of the women they’d hooked up with had made him eternally grateful that he was attracted to cock and only cock—especially the cock belonging to the man whose hip pressed against him.

He placed a hand on Clay’s thigh and gave it a squeeze. Clay’s head turned, and Logan’s breath caught at the storm clouds brewing. They had turned the heat that raced between them all afternoon down to a simmer, but he knew a slight spark would make it flare and cause them to spontaneously combust.

“The two of you are so hot together,” Ethan announced.

Logan turned his head back to the table and saw that all the conversation had halted. “Huh?”

Ethan’s finger waved back and forth between Clay and Logan. “You two. You’re hot. The matching black hair and steamy lust-filled eyes.”

Ryan chuckled. “Forgive my husband. He has no filtering system after a few drinks.”

Logan smiled. “It’s cool. I agree. Clay is very hot.”

“No, no, no. Together. You and Clay together. I bet you set fire to the sheets every time. So who does who?”

“E!” Ryan exclaimed. “That’s none of our business.”

“We’re all friends here. What’s the harm? It’s not like gay sex talk is gonna send anyone into heart palpitations.” Ethan looked over at Rick and Conor. “Well, maybe those two, but they’ve been around me for enough years to become desensitized.”

Rick's sapphire blue eyes met Conor's aquamarine ones for a long moment.

Ethan gasped. "Stop the fucking presses!"

Everyone's head jerked in his direction

"What was that? When did you two—" His hands waved back and forth at Rick and Conor.

Rick lifted his and Conor's linked hands up on the table. "When did we do what?"

"You know God damn what, asshole. You swore the two of you had never, would never..."

"We hadn't. It just kinda happened."

"What? You're telling me Conor tripped and his cock just landed up your ass one day?"

Logan snorted. "Nice, Ethan."

Ryan covered Ethan's mouth with his hand. He looked over at Rick and Conor. "Sorry. I'll keep him quiet, and you can share or not. It's up to you."

Logan could tell that Rick and Conor weren't offended by Ethan's outburst. He knew the three of them had been friends for several years and seemed used to the man's antics. Conversely, Ethan's audacity stunned Logan. He'd only known Ethan, Ryan, Rick and Conor for less than a year, but normally, Ethan was a pretty laid back kind of guy. He was fun loving and affable, but never brash. Maybe he really couldn't hold his beer, as his husband claimed?

“After we married Calleigh and settled down, things changed. In all the years we’ve shared women, neither one of us ever desired the other, but suddenly, when we made love to Calleigh together, I would wonder how it would feel to touch Conor, how it would feel to be touched by Conor. I struggled with the desire for a while until Calleigh confronted us one night. She sat us down and made us talk about the giant pink elephant that had grown in our bedroom.” Rick looked at Conor and smiled. “It turned out that Conor had been fighting similar battles.”

“And how did Calleigh respond?” Clay asked.

Rick and Conor shared a heated look, then chuckled.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“She told us ‘twas fecking hot an’ demanded a front seat te our first pogue. That night, I attempted my first blow job while Calleigh stroked me off. It was some time afore we graduated to shagging.”

“So you’re bi now?” Ryan asked.

Rick shook his head. “It’s not a matter of sexuality. It’s feeling comfortable in our marriage. It’s sharing every aspect of who we are both in the bedroom and beyond. I’m married to Calleigh, as is Conor, but we’re also married to each other. I’ve always loved Conor, and now, I’m also in love with Conor. The change seemed like a natural development.”

“And Calleigh is okay with all this?” Logan questioned.

“Never better.” Rick answered.

“E! Stop that!” Ryan jerked his hand away and wiped it on a napkin sitting on the table.

Logan saw that same hand disappear beneath the table, and Ryan’s arm moved as he appeared to be adjusting his cock. Ryan grasped Ethan’s chin with the other hand and planted a kiss on the lips, which had presumably been teasing him. Logan unabashedly watched as the two men made out. Clay’s hand landed on his crotch, and his cock stiffened. Clay’s breath ghosted over the lobe of his ear, and Logan pressed Clay’s hand tighter against him.

“Shit disturber,” Ryan said, affectionately as his and Ethan’s lips parted. “You’ll pay

for that later.”

“Promise?” Ethan whispered.

“I dinna think ye need to worry about Ryan keep his word E. Ye forget that night the two of ye spent a’ our place during the last snow. Need I remind ye of brekie the next mornin’ when Brandon an’ Michael asked Ryan why the two of ye git ter jump on de scratcher at bedtime when they canny? I think ‘twas the only time I’ve ever seen Ryan get flustered.”

Everyone at the table laughed, including Ryan. Shortly after, they all said their goodbyes. Logan and Clay bolted for the car, then wove their way through the traffic towards South Boston and home. As far as Logan was concerned, they couldn’t reach the sanctuary of their apartment soon enough.

When they pulled into a spot in front of the building, he shot out of the car and rushed for the front steps to their building. The entire way up the stairs to their apartment, he felt the echo of Clay’s feet pounding on the steps as his lover pursued him. He was attempting to unlock the door to their apartment when a hot, heavy weight pressed him into the wood and a pair of large hands gripped his hips. Clay’s stiff cock ground into Logan’s ass as lips feathered kisses down his neck. The hands on his hips slid beneath the T-shirt he wore.

Logan’s muscles danced in reaction to Clay’s touch.

“Open the door, Logan.”

His fingers managed to turn the key, then in the two men stumbled. As soon as Clay cleared the door, the crack of it slamming closed ricocheted in Logan’s brain. Between kisses and caresses, they shed their clothes, until their naked skin finally touched. They eventually made it to the bathroom, and Clay turned to start the

shower. Logan took the opportunity to grind his cock against Clay's ass. His lover's hunched position allowed Logan's hard shaft to slip between the firm, round cheeks. Clay pushed back into Logan's mini-thrusts.

"You'd better hope there's lube in that shower because I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll feel me for days," Logan growled into Clay's ear, then gave his backside a hard smack.

He heard Clay's cry of need just before he removed his processors. When he climbed into the enclosure, the sight of Clay greeted Logan with one leg braced on the lip of the tub and two fingers buried in his ass. With his head tilted back, eyes closed, and lips parted, Clay's was a study of self pleasure. Water pelted his chest, and the rivulets of moisture cascading through the ridges of Clay's muscles mesmerized Logan.

Logan adjusted the shower head, so it didn't beat directly on them. He advanced on Clay and attached his lips to the corded tendons of the long neck, begging for attention. Traces of salt from the sweat of their day at play burst across his taste buds. Beneath that was his favorite flavor of all. Clay.

Logan nibbled and sucked on the tasty skin. His fingers sought and found Clay's nipples. The firm buds already puckered. He rolled the hard peaks, stimulating them to warm up the nerve endings. His mouth found Clay's, and his lover's free arm wrapped around his neck. Tongues thrust against each other as Logan increased the pressure to Clay's nipples, while Clay's hand shoved harder into his hole. Logan's cock told him that if they didn't get their bats to the plate, the party would end before the ninth inning. He pushed away from Clay and removed the man's fingers from the well-stretched channel.

Clay turned and faced the wall of the shower. Logan aligned their hard bodies. The heat radiating from Clay's skin seared his fingers where they touched. In the cubby,

he found the bottle of waterproof lube, quickly he prepared both his cock and Clay's entrance. He held Clay's hip steady with one hand and used the other to line up the head of his shaft with the quivering opening begging for his possession. With one firm thrust, Logan filled Clay until he was balls deep in the heavenly clasp of Clay's body. When Clay pressed back, signaling that it was okay, Logan moved. With long strokes, he became the master and commander of Clay's orgasm.

One of Clay's hands dropped from the wall and reached for his cock, but Logan swatted the offender away. Tonight, he was in control. He would be the only source of pleasure. Only through his body would Clay find fulfillment.

He clasped Clay's hand and forced it back onto the tile. Logan's lips attached themselves to the curve of Clay's neck where it met the slope of his shoulder. He knew that was Clay's most sensitive spot, and with the proper stimulation, Clay would shoot into orbit.

His hand wrapped around Clay's stiff cock. The tight skin slid over a core of steel that reached toward Clay's navel. Logan's momentum increased. Each flutter of Clay's muscles in his channel increased the stimulation as he shuttled back and forth.

His orgasm barreled down on him so fast there was no time for anticipation. He buried himself as deeply as possible inside Clay's heat as volleys of come exploded from his slit. His teeth locked down on Clay's tendon, and warm jets of seed covered his hand.

His brain shut down, and it was a good thing Clay braced himself against the wall because they would have ended up in a twisted pile of limbs at the bottom of the tub. Slowly, his cock softened, and eventually, it slipped out of heaven's embrace. He peppered the back of Clay's neck, shoulders and back with kisses. The muscles beneath Logan's lips trembled as their bodies recovered.

The men eventually stood, and when Clay turned to face him, they shared a slow, wet kiss. His hands automatically sought the globes of Clay's butt, and when he felt the slickness of his seed seeping from Clay's body, his cock jumped. Each time he possessed Clay, a little piece of himself stayed behind and their body chemistries blended.

They finished their shower since the hot water heater's reservoir worked for a limited time only. The rest of the night called for canoodling on the couch and watching movies. Clay lay in front of him, and Logan wrapped his arms around his love, laughing at the comedic antics played out on the flat screen. Commercial breaks meant long minutes of heated kisses, and the best part of all was when Clay fell asleep in his arms. Logan tucked Clay's head into the curve of his shoulder. Soft pants of breath stirred across his neck, and every once in awhile, Clay rubbed against Logan like a cat seeking attention. Logan's hands soothed Clay back into restful sleep, and Logan placed a gentle kiss on the silky black hair falling over Clay's forehead.

"I love you," he whispered.

Chapter Thirteen

Clay sat on the sofa enjoying a cool beer as he channel surfed. He paused on the History channel since they had a show about sexuality in ancient Egypt.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Well, well, well. Looks like the Greeks and Romans weren't the only ones who knew how to enjoy themselves in ancient times. Who knew the Egyptians were raging nymphomaniacs?

Clay angled his head and squinted at the TV, trying to get a better idea of the graphic displayed across his wide screen. He choked as the drink of beer went down the wrong tube.

Apparently, they knew how to have a very good time.

The screen showed a digital reconstruction of the Turin Erotic Papyrus, and if he was not mistaken, that was a woman fucking herself on a crude dildo. He hoped the images were not lifelike, otherwise men today had quite literally gotten the short end of the stick.

Clay flipped channels when the intellectuals started posturing about the symbolism behind the images and all that jazz. The colorful images on the flat screen flew by, his mind unable to settle on something to watch. He knew he stalled, awaiting Logan's arrival. Clay had the day off, but Logan's shift didn't end until eight that night.

Following Jack's recommendation to the higher-ups, Logan secured a position with the Crime Lab based out of headquarters. He'd been working for four months now, and each day, Clay saw more and more of the old Logan shining through the smoky blue eyes he loved. He heard it in the rich laugh that often echoed in the apartment. Logan hadn't had a flashback in almost three months, the longest period yet. Maybe, just maybe, the demons were being put to rest.

Clay jumped as the front door banged open. He snatched his sidearm from the ottoman's compartment and spun to face the intruder. His jaw dropped when he spotted Logan just inside the door.

“Jesus, fuck, Logan! I could have shot you!”

Logan slammed the door shut and stormed past Clay into the spare bedroom. No words of greeting came from Logan's lips. He hadn't even looked Clay in the eyes. The door to the spare room closed with a heavy thud. They'd transformed the space from Logan's old bedroom to a home gym over the winter.

Something must have happened to Logan at work to make him so agitated. Clay let him burn off some steam before approaching the bear in his cave. When Logan got into these moods, the best thing was to give him some time to cool off before confronting the issue. The issue could be one of many. Had Logan had another panic attack or flashback and was angry at the loss of control? Clay didn't think he'd had a session with Matt that day. Even if Logan had met Matt, all the psychiatrist could tell Clay was that anything Matt and Logan had discussed in session was doctor/patient confidentiality. Of course, Logan might have simply endured a shitty day at work.

Clay paced for another thirty minutes. Finally, he'd had enough of the silent treatment. He marched over to the closed door and opened it without knocking. His eyes bugged out at the sight that greeted him.

Logan worked at the bench press. His legs straddled the padded bench. His bare, sweaty chest expanded as he heaved the bar full of weights above his head over and over. Logan wore nothing except a pair of red gym shorts. Clay knew Logan wore an athletic support beneath the skimpy shorts, but the thin material left little to the imagination.

Logan's musky scent filled the air and sent Clay into full mating mode. His fingers

tingled with the need to touch all the glorious skin bare before him, and he wanted to tongue the stiff nipples peaked with the adrenaline and endorphins coursing through Logan's body as a result of his workout. However, before they could give into their carnal desires, Clay had to find out what had set Logan off.

Clay entered the room and moved over to the equipment. He straddled Logan's hips and lifted the bar from his lover's grasp, then placed it in the supports.

Jesus fuck that's heavy.

He peaked at the discs attached to the bar. Logan was up to 250 pounds. No wonder Clay's arms burned. Granted, he was curling, not pressing the bar, but still. Logan made a move to push Clay back, but Clay sat, pinning Logan to the bench. He ground down on Logan's trapped cock as he settled into a comfortable position. Logan stared at him with one eyebrow raised, but remained in a prone position on the bench.

"Fess up," Clay said.

Logan crossed his arms and continued to stare at him. Clay realized that Logan didn't have his processors on and felt like slapping himself on the forehead. He knew Logan always took them off when working out because of the sweat.

He pointed down at Logan, knowing the man could read his lips. "Stay."

Scanning the room for the devices, he saw them perched in the case sitting on the dresser, where they kept their workout gear and extra towels. He snagged them and went back to the bench press. Clay placed the processors behind Logan's ears, slid the magnets over his skull 'til they secured to the implants and switched on the devices. When he finished, he placed a soft kiss on Logan's pursed lips.

"Now speak."

“What am I? A damn dog? Stay. Speak. What’s next roll over?”

Clay licked his lips and slowly let his eyes rove over Logan’s sculpted, tantalizing body. When he once again met Logan’s eyes, he saw the mirroring flare of desire within their blue depths. “We’ll get to that. For now, why don’t you tell me what has you so worked up?”

Logan rocked himself up into a sitting position. “It’s just stuff at work. Nothing major.”

Clay straddled the bench again. He sat facing Logan. “Logan, you can talk to me. You know that. It doesn’t matter if it’s big or small. I’ll listen.”

Logan leaned in and placed a quick kiss on Clay’s lips. “I know you will, baby. Sometimes, I’m afraid that I take advantage of that too often. You know I’m willing to be a sounding board for you, too, right? If you need to get something off your chest or talk about something bothering you on a case, I’d listen, you know?”

“Of course you would. I never doubted that. Now stop procrastinating.”

Logan sighed and looked down at the padded vinyl seat. “Something happened in the lab today. I was logging in a Beretta M9A1 that was seized on a drug raid. The detectives had reason to believe the weapon may have been used in a murder earlier in the week. So I was to test fire the weapon and do a striations match to the bullet collected from the victim. I stood at the microscope when some detective came up behind me. He started talking before getting my attention, and when I turned around to ask him to repeat, he got all indignant and started talking shit.”

“What kind of shit?”

“Oh you know ... ‘Deaf and dumb, Callen? A fifth grader watching crime shows can

answer my questions better than you. You couldn't even get a job on your own. Had to ask that cock bandit you live with to set you up, didn't you?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“Who was it?” Clay growled.

“Doesn’t matter. One of the other investigators overheard him and handled the situation. He’s on administrative leave, but you know—”

“Honey, listen to me. You’re a fantastic technician. You know weapons and their signature characteristics better than anyone. For you, calculating trajectories is like adding one plus one, whereas the rest of us get hives at the thought. I might not work in the same department as you, but don’t think I don’t know just how much respect you’ve gained in the few months since you joined the force. My captain is convinced that the sun shines out your ass. Hell, every time he sees me, he asks about you. I’m feeling a little inadequate,” Clay finished, smiling.

“I appreciate the pep talk, but we both know there are times I still miss things.”

“Well, yeah, but they’re getting fewer and farther between. The implants were not a cure, Logan, and everyone with a modicum of intelligence recognizes that. I sense something else is going on here. This isn’t just about the asshole detective.”

Logan shrugged

Clay slid forward on the seat and draped his legs over Logan’s thighs. His arms encircled Logan’s waist, and his lips nuzzled against Logan’s. It took a few moments, but Logan responded to Clay’s kisses. Their heads tilted until lips met. Clay traced his tongue along the bottom edge of Logan’s lower lip, seeking entry. He flicked the tip over the seam of Logan’s lips, and they parted in welcome. He fed his tongue into Logan’s mouth, moaning at the taste within.

Logan's hands speared through his hair and held him still as the kiss deepened. Clay's cock jumped in his cargo shorts, filling with blood as it did every time Logan was near. Clay was so addicted to his lover that Logan didn't even have to touch him. Being near the man sent him into heat.

Clay's hand dropped to the waistband of Logan's shorts. His fingers burrowed beneath the elastic and encountered the pouch of Logan's jockstrap bulging with his arousal. Clay's hand drifted lower to cup the full balls snug inside the support. Logan moaned, and his hands tightened in Clay's hair.

Before things could get completely out of control, Clay pushed Logan away. He was met by lust filled questioning eyes.

"Wait ... wait ... we were talking."

Logan tried to gather Clay back into his body. "Talk later; fuck now."

Clay's eyes fluttered shut when Logan grabbed his crotch and massaged the hard cock beneath his shorts. He craved Logan. At the moment, he couldn't decide if he wanted to lie back on the bench and spread his legs like a proper slut should or strip the little red shorts from Logan's body and bend him over the bench, while still wearing the jock. He could picture it vividly. Logan's taut ass lifted in the air, open and framed perfectly for his pleasure. Clay could shove his cock deep and thrust into the tight heat until they both found blissful oblivion.

No! Fucking would wait. He wanted to get to the bottom of what was really bothering Logan. Avoidance would not solve the problem. No matter how pleasant the diversion may be.

"No, Logan. Tell me it all, and then I promise I'll ream you so good you'll never look at this bench the same way again. Every time you come in here, you'll picture

yourself bent over and spread open. Your ass raised, begging for my cock. Maybe I'll slap it a few times, get it good and pink. Warm that soft skin up 'til it turns a pretty little rose color, and then ... oh Logan ... then we'll..."

Logan panted. "We'll what, Clay? Please tell me. I wanna hear it."

"You finish, Logan, and I'll do one better. I'll show you."

"Bastard, that's blackmail."

Clay smiled, and Logan growled.

Logan shoved Clay away from him and got off the bench. He paced the length of the room a couple of times. His cock pulsed with need, and Clay withheld his release until Logan finished confessing his soul.

He could just leave, get in the shower and deal with the problem at hand, so to speak. However, he knew that would hurt Clay's feelings. He knew his lover was only trying to help, even if his methods were sadistic. When he calmed down enough so that his cock didn't feel as if it would explode at the next touch, he stopped pacing. Logan stood in the center of the room, legs braced apart, arms crossed as he'd seen his DI do hundreds of times at boot camp.

"They need me to testify on the Markham case on Friday. I have to go up on the stand and answer questions about my test procedures and defend the conclusions."

"And you're worried because?"

"What if I can't hear the defense attorney? What if he asks me questions with his back turned or tries to trick me? Everyone at HQ knows about my hearing, and most of the time, they're all successful about getting my attention and making sure they

face me. But this guy? I don't know him. I don't know his voice. I don't know his mannerisms. All I know is that he's known for exploiting every little loophole in the system, every 'i' not dotted every 't' not crossed to get his clients off. I don't want to be the weak link that lets the murderer of a sixteen-year-old girl back on the streets."

Clay stood and walked over to Logan. He rubbed the stiff arms and loosened the clenched fists. "You're not alone in that courtroom, Logan. The prosecutor won't let him take advantage of you. You stood in dusty streets under desert sun to face down insurgents carrying automatic weapons, intent on killing you with their next shot. I know you can handle one slimy lawyer in a city courtroom. I have faith in you. The force has faith in you, too, otherwise they wouldn't have given you the opportunity to work this case."

Logan heard the words and saw the truth of them in Clay's eyes, the gray mimicking hardened steel with conviction. Clay had faith in him; Clay trusted him. It wouldn't stop the butterflies, but it helped ease the panic before it could consume him. All the CSIs and the case detective told him it would be fine. His methods had been accurate; his conclusion was solidly based on the evidence. He was only one small part of the investigation. Other technicians would give testimony on trace evidence and DNA. He could do this. He had the prosecutor, his team and most importantly Clay in his corner. He might ask Matt about it in their session tomorrow. Maybe he would have some tips or techniques. That was tomorrow though. Tonight, he would make Clay pony up.

Logan took a step back and pushed his gym shorts down to his ankles. He kicked off his sneakers and held out his arms. His thumbs tucked into the wide waistband of his jockstrap.

"Stop! Leave that on," Clay commanded.

Logan held his breath as Clay circled him. Clay's fingers skimmed over the surface of his skin. Traces of heat lingered from the simple touch, and shivers rippled down his spine when Clay's tongue licked the back of his neck. He leaned on his heels, seeking a greater touch, only to jump forward as Clay's hand met the fleshy curve of his butt exposed by the straps of his athletic support. The sharp sting quickly faded to a low throb beneath his skin. Clay forced his wrists behind his back and kicked his feet apart as he would when arresting someone.

Hmm, too bad Clay doesn't have his handcuffs. That could be fun.

“You keep your arms there.”

Logan gripped one hand around the wrist of the other arm to keep his position steady.

Clay stood behind Logan and placed his lips at the microphone of the speech processor behind Logan’s right ear. “You were bad, Logan. Do you know what you did wrong?”

“I ... I...” Logan swallowed. What had he done? What was Clay looking for? He thought about when he’d first come home. “I slammed the front door open and scared you into grabbing your gun?”

“Yes, that was very naughty. I could have hurt you. What else did you do, Logan?”

Logan racked his brain for more indictments. “I didn’t kiss you hello?”

Clay completed the circle around Logan’s body. “And?”

“Umm...” He stared into Clay’s eyes. The steel had turned molten, and Clay’s nostrils flared as his head tilted and his nose slid down Logan’s neck. Logan was having difficulty concentrating. Clay’s deep, commanding voice excited the blood coursing through Logan’s body. The pouch of his jock trapped his hard cock, and he had no way of relieving the pressure. A device designed by evil individuals confined him. The support and security it provided while working out had turned into a tortuous prison. The pain caused a degree of panic, and he pleaded with Clay for freedom with his eyes. He whimpered as Clay’s finger caressed his trapped erection.

“Logan? Only the truth can set you free.”

“I ... um ... I...”Shit what else! Oh yeah.“I gave you lip when you tried to help me?”Please let that be it, please.

Clay reached inside and lifted Logan’s bent cock so it stood straight against his stomach. “Very good.”

Oh thank you, God!It was so much better—even if he looked a little ridiculous with the head of his cock sticking out of the top of waistband as if it were a missile preparing to launch.

“Now, I believe those bad behaviors of yours call for some punishment. You can’t expect to act that way and not pay the price, now can you?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

Clay’s voice held the same steel of every commanding officer Logan had ever served under. He’d never confessed to Clay about his occasional fantasies of servicing an officer, but it seemsonce again Clay had tapped directly into Logan’s desires to give him what he needed.

“No, Sir.”

“That’s better.”

Logan compliantly followed Clay when the man pulled him back to the bench press by his waistband. He tensed, waiting for the snap of the elastic against his hypersensitive skin, but released a long breath when Clay gently let the material rest

without pain. Clay adjusted the angle of the bench in a decline position.

“Step around the rear of the frame and lay on the bench Logan. Let your arms hang over the leg support and grip the bar with both hands.”

He did as told, placing his body at an upward forty-five degree angle. He braced his legs on either side of the bench to keep his balance and open his body for Clay’s ministrations. He looked over his shoulder, trying to see what Clay was up to, but couldn’t see him. However, he refused to break position to get a better look. He rested his head on the end of the bench. His breathing slowed, even as his blood accelerated through his veins. A soft strip of material appeared in front of him and covered his eyes. The darkness only heightened the rest of his senses.

“Okay, love?” Clay whispered.

Logan eagerly nodded his head. They were playing, but Clay always took care of him.

Always made sure he felt safe.

“Now about this punishment. I believe ten swats should suffice.”

Logan braced for the first smack but was startled when, instead of the sharp crack of Clay’s palm, he instead felt a soft caress on both cheeks of his exposed rear. He moaned and arched back into the touch. A soft kiss landed on the back of his neck and one long finger traced the ridges of his spine, continuing down between the cleft of his ass. The tip grazed his entrance, and Logan sought more only to jerk forward, yelping, as pain blossomed with the first spank from Clay’s hand. He imagined the bright pink shape of Clay’s hand on his skin and used the image to feed his desire. Another smack landed on the opposite side, followed by a kiss to the small of his back. The contrary sensations kept him from become acquiescent. Each smack on his

skin increased his craving. His moans echoed in the room. His cock leaked onto the vinyl of the seat, as he pressed against the support. His mind cleared of all the clutter, as he let Clay take him away.

“How many is that, Logan?”

“Um...”

Another hard smack, the strongest yet, made him cry out.

“Logan! How many?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Shit! He was supposed to be counting? “Five?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Sir. Five Sir.”

His hands gripped the bar of the bench frame. His ass throbbed and his cock was the hardest it had ever been, trapped within the confines of his jock. The material riding against the sensitive flesh was part agony, part bliss.

Clay spread Logan’s cheeks, and a sudden coldness had him arching back with a cry. Two of Clay’s fingers breached his hole, and another smack landed on the lower curve where his ass met his thighs. Clay’s fingers pumped inside him as more slaps landed on the burning flesh of his rear.

He was going to lose it. It was only a matter of minutes. Make that seconds! He prayed for mercy when Clay’s fingers found his prostate, nailing the gland. Another finger slid inside, and Clay scissored his fingers within the confines of Logan’s body.

“Clay!”

The fingers left his body and emptiness prevailed until Logan felt the head of Clay’s cock press against his opening. Clay claimed him with one deep plunge of his thick tool. Logan had never been a good bottom before. He'd struggled with letting himself be vulnerable to his lovers. However, he'd come to not only love the feel of Clay inside him, but crave it. He craved the closeness, the completion, the overwhelming sense of tranquility he experienced with Clay's possession. And when he rode Clay's

cock? Logan fucking loved exploring his power bottom skills. His everyday world was such a jumble of partial sounds and frustration that every moment of peace in Clay's arms became crucial to maintaining control of his sanity.

Clay's hips pummeled him as they pumped deep. Over and over. Clay's balls slapped against Logan's ass. The long, thick cock repeatedly slid across his prostate when Clay changed the angle of his thrusts. Strong hands gripped Logan's shoulders for leverage, fingers digging into the soft tissue on the opposite side.

The stimulation was too much, and Logan cried out as an orgasm barreled through him, rising from the depths of his soul. He screamed Clay's name as his cock exploded, soaking the seat beneath him with jets of cream. His grip on the frame of the bench was so tight his nails left scratches in the paint. Clay's cock continued to fuck him relentlessly, each thrust feeding Logan's climax, until with one last shove, Clay froze, and Logan heard his name being screamed as Clay erupted. The hot seed from his love filled him, soothing the ache of his expertly used tissues.

Logan felt Clay collapse against him. The damp skin of Clay's chest met the still spasming muscles of his back. His cock quivered, and the pressure of the bench became uncomfortable.

"Umm, Clay? Can you...?"

"Sorry, honey." Clay quickly sat up and removed Logan's blindfold.

Logan pressed against the bench so he could stand, but his legs had the consistency of Jell-O, and his knees buckled. Clay caught him before he ended up doing damage to his nether bits on the equipment. Clay's arms surrounded him from behind, and his head lolled on Clay's broad shoulder.

"I'd say we both need a shower. Wanna get wet with me?" Clay asked.

Logan nodded. “Then bed? I’m done in for the day.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

He turned and kissed Clay. Their lips lingered as they held each other. All was right in Logan’s world when Clay kissed him, and he clung to his lover, seeking the solace Clay’s love provided.

Chapter Fourteen

Logan looked at the calendar with some sense of shock. He couldn’t believe how fast the last year had gone. Today was the one-year anniversary of his implant surgery. Aside from Clay, the processors were his constant companions. After his discharge, he’d become a shell of a man, angry, anxious and prone to panic induced flashbacks. Today, he found a reason to smile every day, and the once forgotten sound of his laughter was music to his ears. He slept snug in the arms of his love each night, and the passion they shared only grew stronger with each day. His hearing would never be normal, never be what it was, but the surgery had, without a doubt, given him the freedom to move forward with his life. He loved his work at the crime lab. Doing his part to put away scum that terrorized and destroyed other’s lives was challenging and fulfilled a sense of purpose he’d never thought to regain after leaving the Rangers.

He sat at the microscope, humming a little ditty, when out of the corner of his eye he saw one of the CSIs run past the plate-glass wall of his room.

Wonder what that’s all about?

He shrugged and went back to examining tool marks on a mold from a victim’s cause of death injury, trying to recognize any minute detail that would help him identify the weapon. Another officer, this one a lieutenant from District C-6 he’d met a few months ago at Clay’s office, ran past in the same direction.

Okay, that's a bit odd.

Granted, crazy stuff happened around him all the time, but those pounding feet had a distinct feeling. He scooted away from the worktable and went to the opening in the glass wall of his area. He poked his head out and caught Trevor's eyes across the hall in the audio/video lab.

"What up?" he asked.

"Not sure. Think we should check it out?"

"Nah. I'm sure if the building was on fire they'd tell us—they would tell us, right?" he added, smiling.

"Sure, they would. Right after everyone stood outside in the freezing cold and wondered where 'those two guys' were. Of course, by then, we'd be a couple of crispy critters."

"Right ... So what you're saying is we're on our own."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“Pretty much. Don’t worry, buddy, I won’t let you fry.”

“Ah Trev, it gives me all kinds of warm fuzzies to know you care.”

“Shud up!”

Logan stuck his tongue out at the quirky kid, who was a genius with anything electronic. Too bad he had the worst luck with love. Logan wanted others to realize how thoughtful and giving the introvert was. Logan knew the other man was also gay. Trev was pretty subtle about it, but Logan had asked when he caught Trevor’s eyes glued to the ass of one of the uniformed officers a couple of months ago. In Logan’s opinion, Trevor’s problem was that he always went for the wrong type of guy. Big and beefy with a side of asshole was the smaller man’s main dish. Logan and Clay had batted around ideas for potential setups, but the only man Logan considered a potential match was taken. Matt had been seeing his boyfriend for about a year. Logan knew little, since it wouldn’t be professional of Matt to discuss his personal relationships, but in Logan’s opinion some the sparkle had left Matt’s eyes from when they first met.

His head turned at the sound of running feet, and he flagged down the sprinter, heading his direction.

“Hey, Coleman! What’s going on, man? What’s with the stampede?”

“Officer down. Some guy got a gun inside the courthouse and is holding a bunch of people hostage.”

“Oh shit! How the hell did that happen?”

“Apparently, the guy had credentials. Security let him keep his weapon. I gotta go, man.”

“Yeah ... yeah, go. Do your thing.”

Trevor stood next to him, and Logan’s eyes met his before they sprinted across the hall into Trevor’s domain. Numerous video screens filled the space, and with a couple of quick taps on the keyboard, they had a live video feed to the Moakley Courthouse in the Seaport District. The massive glass and brick structure housed the U.S. Attorney’s office, twenty-seven federal courtrooms and meeting halls used for various lectures. The place was an ever changing art gallery and even offered rentals for parties with full catering services. It masterfully fused justice and capitalism.

“Can you get us a view inside?”

Trevor clicked away on the keyboard for a few more seconds as he hacked into the security camera footage.

“You know I could get in deep doo-doo for this?”

“I doubt anyone’s worried about a couple of squints with a bird's eye view at the moment. Besides, maybe we can see something that can help?”

“Mitchell!”

Logan and Trevor spun to see Captain Fredricks standing in the doorway. They both spun around, using their bodies to block the view of the monitors.

“Yes, Captain?” Trevor answered.

“Is that a live video feed from inside the courthouse?”

“Um...”

“If it is, move over. You’re blocking my view!”

“Yes, Sir!”

Logan stepped aside so the Captain could gather around the monitor with them.

“Can you make this any bigger, Mitchell?”

With a couple of taps, the gigantic wall in front of them came to life. Logan watched as Trevor flipped through various camera feeds ‘til he found one that was aimed toward the unfolding action. The situation seemed to take place on the third floor inside the atrium. Logan could see the massive concave glass wall that looked out onto the city skyline and harbor. The black and white images did nothing to dispel the terror on the faces of the hostages, especially with the high-quality resolution and Trevor’s ability to zoom in. The gunman had his arm wrapped around a woman’s neck and a semi-automatic pistol pressed against her head. About twenty hostages sprawled on the granite floor, hands spread wide.

He could see one officer lying in a pool of blood off the side. His gun inches from his slack hand. Logan couldn’t tell if the officer was dead or unconscious from the wound. He turned his gaze to the gunman, recognizing the hardened resolve in the man’s eyes. This was no panicked man in an out-of-control situation. Hate and determination coexisted in his eyes. Logan was intimately acquainted with that expression.

This will not end well.

Logan's fingers itched to text Clay and find out where he was. The courthouse was in his district, and it was very possible his partner could end up in the thick of things. Only two things prevented him from doing so. The first was not wanting to distract Clay if he was onsite, and second, he knew exactly what was happening since he saw it all in live and living color, so to speak. He saw movement in the shadowed back corner of the balconied hallway. He squinted to identify if this was an additional threat or the good guys coming to the rescue.

Logan gasped as he recognized the familiar shape. Trevor and Fredrick both turned to him with questioning looks.

“That’s Clay.”

“Where?” Trevor exclaimed.

Logan pointed at the wall where he’d seen the movement.

“I don’t see anything,” Fredricks said.

“Wait! There, behind the pillar. Are you sure that’s him? It’s awfully dark in that corner,” Trevor asked.

He nodded his head, unable to speak.

“Who’s Clay?” Fredricks questioned.

“Detective Clayton Phillips, Sir. Logan’s partner.”

“Partner? What’s a lab tech doing at an active crime scene?”

“No, Sir, life partner.”

“Oh, well, shit.”

Trevor’s fingers played for a few seconds, and the image zoomed in. Logan's eyes met Clay’s through the video feed. The video was so close that Clay’s image filled the entire wall. He kept his eyes fixed on the gunman. Resolve hardened the gaze Logan had seen soft with love only hours before as they had said goodbye. Clay had his back to the large, white, round pillar. He came around the side with his gun trained on the man holding the woman hostage. Clay made a gesture with his hand,

and three other officers crept into the space behind him. Logan's eyes trained on Clay's lips as Clay identified himself to the gunman. The image retracted, and they saw the assailant spin around to face Clay and his fellow officers.

Logan couldn't read the gunman's lips, but his body language shouted that he was not happy with the turn of events. As much as Logan wanted to monitor Clay, he knew the gunman held all the clues. He scanned his body language for the telltale signs that all hell would break loose. Tightened muscles, bracing posture. If only Logan could see his eyes, then he'd know. Overthere, he'd gotten really good at reading potential targets, and those skills never truly left you.

"What's happening?" Trevor asked.

Logan trained his eyes on Clay once again. He watched his lover's lips move and translated, since they didn't have sound.

"Clay is speaking to the gunman. 'Put down your weapon. You don't want to do this ... that may be, but this is not the answer ... let the woman go. She's not at fault.'" Logan could tell the gunman was getting agitated. His gun arm raised, and the pistol pressed tighter against the woman's head. He took his eyes away from the wall for a second and looked at Trevor. His friend caught his gaze, squeezing Logan's shoulder.

"He's a excellent cop, Logan. He knows what he's doing."

Logan nodded, and when they looked back at the wall, his eyes widened as a flash of light burst from the gunman's weapon. Clay stepped out from the side of the pillar, his weapon still trained on the suspect. With a sickening realization of what was about to happen, and with no power to stop the event from unfolding, Logan watched as the gunman fired a second shot. A dark cloud burst from Clay's side. His lover got off two rounds, and the gunman stumbled back, dropping the woman before he hit the floor. Clay fell backwards, and a pool of blood spilled out across the hard floor.

Oh God, no! Not again! This can't be happening again!

Logan blinked, and instantly, he was back in time. He lay in the street cradling Adams' head. He screamed for another squad member to come help him. The rat-a-tat-tat sounds of bullets being fired, the splat as the rounds smacked into buildings and thud when they dug into the ground, a far off echo. Red tracers from the thousands of rounds being fired filled the surrounding sky. However, when Logan looked down, it wasn't Adams' green eyes staring sightlessly at him. It wasn't light blond hair matted with blood from the perfectly concentric hole in his forehead. Sightless stormy gray eyes stared up at him and blood coated black hair stuck to his fingers. A gut wrenching cry echoed from the depths of Logan's soul as his hands tried to cover the gapping exit wound, pouring Clay's life-force into the dirt and covering Logan's hands. He kneeled in the blood-filled street, shouting in denial, begging Clay to wake up, to move. They had to take cover. His breathing became erratic, his head spun and his heart galloped in his chest. Bullets flew and the ground shook from the concussion of explosions surrounding him, but the world was silent. The image wavered as if he were staring into a desert mirage.

No! This is not real! I am not being shot at. I am in the AV lab.

The image dissolved into a strange, uniform meld of reality and flashback. He saw desert streets and plasma screens. Logan stomped his foot on the ground. This is not dirt and sand; this is tiled linoleum. The surface beneath him smoothed. He took a deep breath and let it out. He did it again, and one more time. The pounding in his head lessened, and his hands stopped shaking.

That is not the scent of cordite and blood in my nose, that is Trevor's aftershave. Clay's dead body is not in my arms. I am home. I am safe. I am loved. I am leaving.

The flashback dissolved and the AV suite of the Boston crime lab took shape. He looked around and noticed a small crowd had gathered. Logan hated crowds. He

hated feeling like a freak. He hated being vulnerable. Trevor kneeled in front of him, and Logan realized he'd somehow ended up on the floor. He had his arms wrapped around his knees, and groaned as he uncurled and tried to stand, stretching his tight muscles. Trevor helped him up, his friend's hands supporting him until he was stable on his feet. He looked around the room and saw faces filled with question, sympathy, and pity. God, he hated the pity worst. Logan closed his eyes and repeated the words Matt had taught him.

I am Logan Callen, former U.S. Army Ranger. The hell I survived does not control me. I am stronger today than I was yesterday. I will be stronger tomorrow than I am today.

“Logan?”

He heard Trevor's voice and opened his eyes. He concentrated on that one face. The others in the room didn't matter. He used Trevor as a fixation point to complete his ground. The world around him came back into focus, and he once again took possession of his body. The heat from the vent above them blew warm air across his skin. He blinked, trying to bring back moisture to his burning eyes. Trevor stood before him, and Logan could tell the younger man was unsure how to help him. He raised his arm, the limb heavy and disjointed.

He squeezed Trevor's shoulder, giving his thanks without words.

“What do you need, Logan?”

Trevor's soft, light voice floated towards him. He was tired. He wanted to lie down and rest. The flashbacks always sucked him dry.

“Water,” he croaked out.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Trevor looked over his shoulder at Fredrick. “Get him some water, please.” He pulled his chair from beneath the desk and placed it behind Logan. “He went to get your water. Sit down, buddy.”

Logan followed Trevor’s orders as if he were the senior drill sergeant at boot camp. Trevor crouched down in front of him and placed his hands on the arm of the chair. A bottle of water appeared in front of him, and he accepted it with thanks from the unknown source.

“Logan, are you with us?”

He nodded but didn’t speak.

“Drink your water, give yourself a few moments then I’ll take you to Clay.”

Clay!

Logan sprang from the chair and headed towards the door to the lab, but a set of powerful arms wrapped around his waist stopped him.

“Let me go!” he shouted. “I have to leave. I have to get to Clay.”

“Time out, Logan.”

The fight left his body, and the buzzing in his brain went silent. He turned his head and realized Matt was the one restraining him. ‘Time out’ was their phrase. The one used in sessions when things were getting too intense and he needed a break. His

conditioning to those words and the comfort they offered was bizarre.

“Good. Now, turn around and look at me,” Matt ordered.

He did and saw Trevor standing a few feet behind them. He stared at Matt, jaw hanging open. Amid his own personal crisis, Logan almost let out a chuckle.

“Clay is on his way to Boston Medical Center. We’ll take you in a matter of minutes, but I need to make sure you’re stable.”

“I’m good, Matt. It worked. I left for awhile, but I’m back.”

“Okay, then let’s go.”

“Can I come with you?” Trevor asked quietly.

Matt turned; Logan was supremely pleased as the large man froze at the sight of Trevor's small frame in the doorway. Logan nodded, but noticed that Trevor only had eyes for Matt and hadn’t seen his assent.

“Who are you?” Matt asked.

Logan moved away from Matt and stood between his two friends. “Matt Lincoln, this is Trevor Mitchell. Trevor is a friend of mine here at the lab. He helped me find my ground during the flashback.”

Logan watched as the two men shook hands, their touch lingering beyond politeness.

“I’ll be in the car, waiting.” He turned and made his way down the hall towards the exit.

Logan paced inside the surgical waiting room. The carpet was worn in tracks from thousands of loved ones doing the same. A pair of hands pressed on his shoulders, halting his progress. He knew they were Ryan's because the man's distinctive woodsy aftershave drifted from behind him. Ethan appeared, holding out a steaming cup.

"Caffeine is probably the last thing you need right now, but..."

Logan accepted the gift. "Thank you. Believe it or not, if I wasn't moving, I'd probably collapse. So this caffeine may be the only other thing keeping me upright." The three of them joined Matt and Trevor in the chairs lining the far wall.

Vic and Chase had left a moment ago to see if they could use their pull as doctors to ferret some information out of the staff on Clay's condition. Logan didn't think it would work with the privacy laws, but if it made his friends feel helpful and on the slim chance they came back with some information, then Logan was all for it.

"How are you doing, Logan?" Matt asked.

Logan knew he wasn't asking about the tension from waiting on the news about Clay's surgery in progress. Matt was referring to the aftereffects of Logan's flashback.

"I'm tired and my head hurts as usual, but it's bearable."

"Did you take anything? Do we need to talk about it?"

Logan shook his head. "Not now. Maybe ... maybe, later? After we know everything."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“I trust you, Logan. You know your body; you know your limits. I’ll only intervene if absolutely necessary.”

“I know, Matt. Thank you. One thing I wanted to ask. Why were you at HQ in the first place?”

“I was there consulting on another case. I got a call from Trevor here and ran up the couple of flights to the lab.”

He looked at Trevor. “How...”

Trevor shrugged. “I could tell you were having a flashback. I’ve seen them before. You had your cell on you, and I scrolled through your contacts ‘til I found Matt’s name. I knew you needed him more than you needed me.”

Logan stood and pulled Trevor from the hardback uncomfortable chairs, gathering him in his arms. Trevor’s small arms locked around his waist, and with surprising strength, squeezed him tight. Logan tilted his head so his lips rested against Trevor’s ear, so only his friend could hear him. “Thank you, but you’re mistaken. It was your presence, your voice that helped ground me. I needed you, and you brought me home. I’ll never forget that Trev.”

Logan pulled back and dipped his head to place a soft, chaste kiss on Trevor’s lips. They’d never shared kisses or anything before, but it was the only way Logan could think of to convey his gratitude for Trevor’s support and friendship. A ghost of a smile appeared on Logan’s lips when he heard a low growl from Matt beside them. Logan went back to his seat, accepting his coffee from Ethan’s hand.

Ethan leaned forward and looked down the row of chairs at Trevor. “How did you know?”

“My dad had them when I was a kid. Mostly, it was Logan’s eyes. They were open, but vacant. He’d curled in on himself and I heard some words beneath his breath. It was obvious at that point what was happening. I knew he wasn’t in that lab with us, so I did everything I could think of to draw him out.”

“Do they happen often, Logan?” Ryan asked.

“A lot less now than when I first came home. I’ve been working with Matt for the past year and a half. He’s the one who helped me get the anxiety under control and taught me the grounding techniques to pull free when it does.”

Logan saw Rick, Conor, Calleigh, and the kids come rushing into the waiting area. Rick had Brandon in his arms, Conor had Michael and Calleigh tried to control a wiggling toddler. Brandon broke free and raced towards him.

“Uncle Logan!”

He knelt on the floor, gathering the little five-year-old close. After a couple of seconds, he saw Michael standing right behind his brother and opened his arms so all three of them could share the hug. Small hands grasped his cheeks. He stared into the blond hair and intelligent green eyes of Michael.

“Don’t worry, Uncle Logan. Uncle Clay will get better.”

“I pray so, buddy. Until then, I have you to take care of me.”

Twin blond heads nodded in unison. Logan looked up at their parents, waiting a few steps away.

“You all didn’t have to come, but thank you.”

Conor stepped forward. “Yer family.”

And that said it all in Logan’s opinion. His eyes misted over as he realized that these men and women were his family. They were united by friendship and love. When he’d first come home, he’d felt alone, isolated by his hearing loss, anxiety, fear, and anger. Now, his friends surrounded him, supporting one another as strongly as a squad under fire. He’d not only found love, but family.

Rick looked at Ethan. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I was in my office, not the courtrooms. They evacuated us out the back side of the building. We were never near the danger.”

Ryan put his arm around his husband. “Doesn’t matter if you were on the same floor or the same block. Someone threatened your safety, E. That’s unacceptable. Until we know you’re okay, we’ll always worry.”

Ethan kissed Ryan before looking back at Rick and Conor. “I know. That’s why I love you guys.”

“Is there a Logan Callen here?”

Logan turned and saw a nurse in scrubs scanning the room.

He stood and took several steps forward. “I’m Logan Callen.”

“Mr. Callen, please come with me. I’ll take you to meet the surgeon.” She looked at the mass of people gathered in the waiting area. “Are all these people with you?”

“Yes, this is my family.”

She nodded. “You can bring one person with you.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Logan looked behind him. He figured the obvious choice would be Matt. In case the news was bad, he would need the man's help, but his eyes drifted to the left, and immediately, he knew his choice.

"Trevor?"

The younger man's head jerked up, and his eyes widen.

"You want me?"

"Please. You were there in the beginning. I'd like for you to be there now."

Trev smiled and nodded his direction. Together, they followed the nurse behind a set of doors and into another smaller waiting area. A small round table, chairs, and a water cooler occupied the corner.

"Dr. Clinton will be with you shortly."

Logan couldn't sit and prowled around the enclosed area. Trevor slouched in one of the cushioned chairs, his presence soothing and unobtrusive. The door opened and Logan held his breath. Vic walked in, followed by Chase.

"Did you find out anything?"

"We did."

"You didn't hear this from us, but the surgery is going well. They were able stabilize

him. Hopefully, it won't be too much longer. Do you want us to stay, in case you have questions?" Chase asked.

"Or in case we have questions you may not think of?" Vic added.

"Yes, please. Thanks guys. Oh, sorry this is Trevor. He's a friend from work."

Chase smiled. "We met out in the waiting area."

"Oh right. Sorry, my brain is a little scattered."

Vic took Logan in his arms. "Understandable. I'm a doctor, and I'm not supposed to make guarantees, but he's going to be fine, Logan. Clay's strong and he's got a lot to fight for."

The door opened again, and Logan stepped away from Vic. A man dressed in obvious hospital garb entered and sat at the table. He had a tablet in his hands and kept scanning and tapping on the screen.

"Please have a seat. I'm Dr. Clinton."

Logan complied. Trevor, Vic, and Chase moved over to the table to sit beside him.

"I understand you are Detective Phillips' domestic partner. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir. And this is my friend Trevor and Drs. Burns and Pruitte." The doctor continued to look down at the tablet and play with the screen. "Dr. Clinton? I understand you're busy, but please look at me when you speak."

The doctor looked up with an expression of vague impatience until he spotted Logan's processors.

"I apologize. First, let me assure you that Detective Phillips came through the surgery just fine. He should make a complete recovery. The bullet, a nine millimeter jacketed hollow point according to police, passed through his vest between his fourth and fifth rib. It nicked the top edge of the fifth rib and lodged in the middle lobe of his left lung. The projectile created a perforation in the lung and caused it to collapse. We removed the bullet and inserted a chest tube to re-inflate his lung, then closed the tears. Detective Phillips was fortunate that the bullet didn't damage his heart or any major arteries.

Logan's mind was spinning. Clay had been shot. They'd cut him open and had to sew his lung closed? Logically, he knew injury was a risk that came with the job. As a Ranger, he'd faced that every day and even worked through the loss of teammates. But none of them were his Clay. He'd never laid on their chest and felt the thud of their heart beating. It was a very different reality. He knew he should ask questions about Clay's care, but couldn't seem to form a complete sentence. He looked over at Chase and Vic.

"How long will you keep the chest tube in?" Vic asked.

"I'm sorry, who are you again?"

"I'm Dr. Vic Burns. I'm the director of musculoskeletal imaging and intervention over at Mass General. This Dr. Chase Pruitte. Plastic and reconstructive surgeon."

"I see. As soon as we're sure the pneumothorax is decreasing on X-ray, we'll take out the tube."

"And, I assume you've put him on IV antibiotics. God knows what kind of bacteria were introduced from the bullet." Chase said.

"Of course. We also have him on pain medication." He looked at Logan. "Your

partner should regain full function six to eight weeks. Maybe sooner. If all goes well, we will release him in four to five days."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Logan took his first real breath since he saw Clay go down on the video. "Thank you, Dr. Clinton. May I go see him now?"

"He's in recovery, and they should move him to his room soon. The nurse will tell you where to go. Do you have any other questions?"

"No, sir, not right now."

The doctor nodded his head, then stood. He left the room, and Logan turned to the group. Trevor held his arms open, and Logan gratefully accepted the comfort. Before he knew it, his eyes were watering, and he struggled to control his breathing.

"It's okay, Logan. Clay is going to heal."

He nodded his head. He knew that. The tears were not of sorrow but relief. He felt a crushing weight lift from his chest. He would not lose Clay, like he had Brian. Clay was alive. He would feel Clay's arms around him again, feel their lips press together. They would continue to love, deeper and stronger than before, with the second or really third chance they'd been given. He sat up and wiped his eyes. Trevor handed him a tissue from the box on the table.

"Thanks, Trev ... again," he said, smiling. "And you guys. I just froze and..."

"That's why we offered to stay. We've both been in situations where we have to counsel patients and their families on complicated and traumatic news. Most only hear about twenty percent of what we say the first time, so it helps to have multiple sets of ears and brains present to get the full scope of information. Now, if it's okay

with you, we will go share the good news with the rest of the gang."

Logan nodded and gave Vic and Chase a hug. "Thank you. Really."

"Anytime, Logan. But hopefully not soon." Chase said.

Trevor held the door open. "Now, let's go find your man."

Chapter Fifteen

Logan sat beside Clay's bed, waiting for him to wake up. The multitude of tubes entering and leaving his lover's body was daunting, but he kept repeating the doctor's words in his head. Clay would make a complete recovery. Right now, his skin was pale, he was being supplied extra oxygen until his lungs could support themselves. The anesthetic given during the lifesaving procedure silenced his normally larger-than-life personality. Now, it was a waiting game. That was okay; Logan had nothing but time.

"Hey Logan, we're going to take the kids home. You need anything?" Rick asked, poking his head in the doorway.

"No, thank you, Rick. Tell Conor and everyone the same. We appreciate you guys dropping everything to be here. Oh, and tell the boys Clay and I will take them to the aquarium as soon as he's better."

Rick smiled. "I'm sure they'll be ecstatic. You know they love spending time with you two."

"I'm sure you, Conor, and Calleigh appreciate the free time, too. In fact, we may just take Allanah off your hands while we're at it. Think you three could find something to occupy yourselves for an entire afternoon?"

Logan laughed at Rick's expression. The longing, lust, and love for his husband and wife were obvious to the most casual observer.

"Oh, I'm sure that won't be a problem."

"I'll bet. Now, get out of here. Oh wait! Is anyone else still lingering out there?"

"Ethan and Ryan are here, but Ryan was talking about getting Ethan home. It's been a long day. Vic and Chase left about twenty minutes ago. I haven't seen your buddy Trevor or Matt for awhile."

"Okay, thanks."

Rick tapped on the doorframe in goodbye, and Logan looked back at the still man on the bed. He slid his hand beneath Clay's on the mattress and rested his chin on the plastic rail. His eyes were heavy, and it was getting difficult to keep them open. It seemed like the adrenaline that had coursed through his system throughout the day had run its course and he was about to crash. If experience held true, it would be a hard landing. He kissed the back of Clay's hand and placed it back on the bed, then pushed the chair into a reclining position and closed his eyes. He would just take a little nap, recharge his batteries and be ready for when Clay woke up.

It felt as if Clay's brain was stuffed with cotton. When he swallowed, someone had implanted sandpaper in his throat, and his side burned as if all the minions of hell were having a party in his chest.

What the fuck had happened? Clay searched his fragmented mind until his memories coalesced into a clear image. Courthouse ... gunman ... hostages ... shots fired. Well that explained why his side hurt. Why hadn't his vest protected him?

He tried to open his eyes, but the lids refused to obey his commands. Something

simpler, maybe? He wiggled his finger, then his toes. Well, at least, he knew he wasn't paralysed. Then again, he didn't think people with paralysis felt pain like this. Maybe they did?

I don't know that requires more brain power than I'm capable of right now.

Clay tried to open his eyes, but this time with more success. The room was blurry, but he saw the plain white walls of the generic hospital room. Hospital sounds registered, and so did the soft snuffles of someone breathing nearby. He'd recognize those sounds anywhere. Logan was with him and, by the sound of it, deeply asleep. Clay turned his head and saw Logan's large frame curled up on the recliner next to the bed. He lay on his side facing Clay and, as Clay suspected, fast asleep. It took a lot for Logan to crash that hard. Normally, the man slept lighter than a cat, waking at the slightest noise. He still took medication to help him sleep at night since nightmares were a recurring problem.

Clay was loath to wake his lover, but wished he could see the dark blue eyes. In their depths, he could read the truth. As if a genie granted his desire, the lids opened and their gazes locked. Logan jumped up from the chair and bent over his bed. A warm hand smoothed back the hair from Clay's forehead, and the softest, most perfect lips he'd ever tasted bestowed their welcome on his chapped skin.

"I love you, Clay."

“Love—”

God, his throat hurt, and his voice was scratchy. Logan placed an ice chip to his lips, and he opened his mouth. The cool moisture was heavenly and went a long way to soothing the burn. Something splashed on his cheek. He opened his eyes to see Logan crying. Logan had shed a lot of tears since he'd started therapy, but there was something different about the ones currently tracking down his handsome face.

“I'm okay, honey.” He had no idea if that was true, but he couldn't have Logan crying over him. His love had suffered enough, and Clay would not add to the demons haunting Logan's soul.

Logan nodded. “I know. I'm sorry. When I saw you get shot, it happened all over again.”

Wait a minute! When Logan saw me get shot?

“Saw?”

Logan's head rested in the crook of Clay's neck, and Clay felt him nod.

Logan fumbled with the switch to raise the bed, then picked up Clay's hand resting on the bed. “Trevor and I watched the whole thing on monitors in the lab. He hacked into the security cameras inside the building. When I saw you come through the door behind the gunman, my heart crashed to a halt. I swear to God, I'd never been so scared—even in the midst of the worst fire fight I could remember. Then I saw the flash of his gun, the blood spray from your chest, and I knew it was happening all

over again.”

"Brian."

Logan nodded. "There was a palpable tension in the air that day. An absolute silence around us, and it made me twitchy."

"I know the feeling." Clay said. "When I was still on patrol there were times or situations when we'd be confronting a suspect and you just knew it was going to go wrong."

"Naturally, my instincts started screaming. I lifted my gun. Brian asked what was wrong. Right before I turned to tell him something was up, I saw a reflection on the hill in front of me. The next thing I knew, he had a hole in the center of his forehead and all hell broke loose.” Logan took a deep breath and looked deep into Clay’s gray eyes. "I kneeled in the dirt and cradling my lover’s dead body while chaos reigned around us. The explosion that caused my injury happened while I was trying to carry him back to where the rest of our squad was hunkered down.” Logan swiped at his damp cheeks. “When I saw you go down, it was like it was happening all over again. I went into a flashback, but instead of Adams in my arms, it was you.”

Clay squeezed Logan’s hand. “Baby, I’m so sorry. Do you need to call Matt?”

Logan shook his head. "He was here. Well there ... at the station when I had the flashback. Then he was here. Oh, and he met Trevor." Logan smiled. "I think I saw sparks."

"That's a lot of words and my brain isn't online yet. But promise you'll call him if there is a need?"

Clay's chest ached for a whole other reason, listening to Logan describe his friend's

last moments. Logan had always been dismissive about his and Brian's intimate relationship, but Clay knew the man had been important, and his death hit Logan hard. He hated the fact that Logan saw him get hurt. He hated even more that watching the video feed forced Logan into a flashback after the traumatic visions had hibernated for months.

Clay hadn't pushed Logan, but maybe the time had come to reach out to the remaining members of his squad. Maybe by talking with his former teammates, Logan could find closure in their shared grief. Logan was Clay's entire world, and he couldn't imagine what it would feel like to witness an assault on the man he loved. All things considered, it was surprising that Logan hadn't regressed to the shell of man Clay had brought home. He would have to thank Matt for teaching Logan the skills he needed to withdraw from the terror inducing visions that could command him at the drop of a hat.

"Clay?"

He slowly opened his eyes. "I'm okay. Just resting my eyes."

Logan leaned over the rail of the bed and kissed Clay. "I love you. I was thinking ... maybe it's time to call up my old squad. Maybe they'll want to see me, maybe they won't. But, I think I have to try."

"Great idea, baby. We'll do that right after I take a nap."

Clay closed his eyes and smiled.

Logan stepped outside the hospital and pulled out his cell phone. Clay had said they would call his former teammates together, and Logan loved how supportive Clay wanted to be, but this was something he had to do on his own.

He'd never deleted the old group chat, but he'd avoided looking at the old texts since the day of the attack. He pulled it up and scrolled through messages that were now almost two years old. It seemed so long ago, and yet just like yesterday at the same time.

Red Ranger: Head's up. Brief 0500.

Blue Ranger: 0500. That's a war crime.

Yellow Ranger: You literally signed up for war, Dipshit.

Blue Ranger: Yeah but like ... not against my alarm clock.

Green Ranger: I'll be there. Coffee in one hand, regret in the other.

Yellow Ranger: Make it two coffees. And bring donuts. The good kind.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Green Ranger: Gee. I think the local donut place got blown up. Want me to run by the QT? Oh wait, that's like 6000 miles away.

Yellow Ranger: Forget it. Gas station donuts are like hockey pucks. Last time Markham chipped his tooth and cried.

Black Ranger: I DID NOT CRY YOU ASSHOLE. I GOT SAND IN MY EYE!

Pink Ranger: I have it on video

Delete that

Make me

Red Ranger: Focus. Briefing covers our next field op. Real deal. Bring your A-game and some actual working pens this time.

Blue Ranger: I'll bring crayons for Markham

Black Ranger: You're just mad I color inside the lines better than you

Yellow Ranger: Can we also discuss that someone labeled all the MREs BioHazard, and somehow they're now more tempting?

Green Ranger: MREs are first come, first regret.

Pink Ranger: Especially the "beef" stew. I still don't believe that's a legally defined

meat.

Red Ranger: ENOUGH! 0500. Show up, gear up, shut up.

Blue Ranger: Inspiring words. Clearly worthy of a nobel laureate.

God they'd had been such idiots. The text chain had been all the members of the Alpha team on Logan's squad. Markham or Black Ranger had convinced them to all pick code names based on the Power Ranger characters. His niece had been obsessed. Logan had gone with Blue Ranger and Adams was Green. Mya, as the only female in their squad, claimed Pink. Even though Greg had argued, why should she get pink just because she was a girl? That led to a heated debate about systemic sexism and the military. Their team leader, Staff Sargent Long, got coined Red Ranger and Greg ended up with yellow.

Logan's finger hovered over the space to type out a new text. He started to punch out a message, but stopped.

There's only Long and Markham left.

Of the people in the chain, Brian, Mya, and Greg were all dead. He didn't think he could type a message and then see a notification that Brian, Mya, and Greg's numbers failed to send, or worse, that someone else received them and responded, "Who is this?".

Logan found his old team leader's contact information. A tremor ran through his finger as he tapped the number. The trill of a ring resonated through his processors. With the bluetooth streaming capabilities, he heard the call in both ears, but Logan still sometimes used the captioning app for unfamiliar callers.

"Logan? Is that you?"

"Hey Red Ranger."

"Holy fuck. Where are you? How are you? Why didn't you call me back, asshole! Do you know how many voicemails and text messages I've left you?"

He did. And he hadn't listened or read a single one of them.

"I ... I lost my way, Sarge. After ... after that day..."

"Are you safe, Sergeant? I'm CONUS. Wherever you are, I can be there in a few hours."

Logan sniffed, and he inhaled and exhaled. He didn't know why, but he'd barred his head and heart from the survivors of his squad. His squad leader had always been not only his boss, but a friend. Logan realized in that moment he hadn't been one in return.

"I'm fine. Well not fine, but okay. I'm sorry Anthony. I'm sorry I disappeared."

"Where are you? I'm coming and I'm bringing Markham with me."

"You're in contact with him?"

"You could say that. Now stop stalling."

"I'm in Boston."

"Son of a bitch. We're in P-Town."

What? Why is Sarge in P-Town? He's from Oregon. And who the fuck is we?

"Here's what you're going to do. Drop me a pin. I can be there in a couple of hours. Then we're going to sit down—"

"Wait. Wait. It's not a good time."

"Logan! I'm not letting you disappear again."

"No, I promise. It's just ... my ... um, my partner was shot today. Yesterday? I don't know what time it is. And I'm, well we, are going to be at the hospital for a few days at least."

"Jesus Christ, Logan. Lead with that next time! Are they okay? What happened?"

This was his chance to lay his cards out on the table. Tell his friend, the man who'd had his back in battle, the man he sat around fires getting drunk with, the truth about himself. Fuck, did Clay have the cold sweats like this when he came out to me?

"They ... nohe. He was shot on the job. He's a detective with BPD. But the surgery was successful. The doc said he would make a full recovery."

There was nothing but silence streaming through his processors and Logan glanced

down at the phone to see if the call got dropped. Should he say something? Should he hang up?

"I'm sorry your partner got hurt. But I'm really glad you found somebody after what happened to Adams. That's one of the reasons I've been so afraid for you. Losing your boyfriend like that, fuck Logan..."

Logan froze.

"Wha ... what are you talking about, Sarge?"

"Seriously? You think I didn't know about the two of you?"

"But, you never ... you could have ... why didn't you..."

"I see you're as loquacious as ever." Long said, chuckling.

Logan shook the fog out of his brain. "Give me a few days to get Clay home, then we'll set a meet."

"You got it, Blue Ranger."

Chapter Sixteen

A few days turned into a month, but with Thanksgiving behind them and Christmas looming, the time for stalling had ended. Clay's leave ended on Monday, but the doctors recommended desk duty only. A fact that Logan appreciated and Clay grumbled about. He picked up his phone and opened the new group chat with Long and Markham. In a moment of dark humor, Logan titled it The Last of Us.

Logan: You almost here?

Long: Turning onto Columbia now. Be there in 10 mikes

Logan: What about you, Black Ranger?

Markham: What about me, what?

Logan: ETA?

Markham: Time is a construct of mortals. I have no need for such trivialities.

Logan: I thought I was the one with the traumatic brain injury?

Markham: Blue Ranger has a new nickname...Scarecrow!

Logan: I don't get it

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

Markham: You would. If you only had a brain...??

Long: ????

Logan: Where's the damn block this number on these phones?

Markham: Doesn't matter. I'll just interrogate sarge. He'll cave. Guy's gone soft in retirement.

Long: That's not what I heard last night

Logan: ????

Logan: Don't text and drive. See you soon.

Logan set the phone on the counter and checked the surroundings again. He wanted to make sure everything was in order for Sarge and Markham. Both of them had said they were bringing their significant other. Logan wasn't sure how to feel about that. He was nervous enough, having to face his former teammates for the first time after the attack. Now he had to adhere to a layer of social niceties. But since Long and Markham agreed to meet him at the apartment and where he and Clay lived, he supposed it was only fair. Logan was curious to find out more about sarge now living on the east coast. Maybe whoever he was dating came from this side of the country? Love would explain the decision for a major relocation. Logan still wasn't sure where Markham lived. The man had been cagey as hell and every time they brought it up in conversation, he'd change the topic. But Markham also had a wicked case of ADHD, so talking to him was often like following a pinball ricochet around a playing field.

Logan had lost count of the number of times new topics got introduced mid conversation over the years.

"Logan. Look at me."

He turned to face Clay and crossed his arms.

"It's going to be fine. You've been talking to them for the past month. You know they're eager to see you. The place looks fantastic. Cleanest since the day I moved in. You practically scrubbed off the finish from the floors and cabinets. We have snacks and drinks. Don't think I didn't see you Googling conversation topics in bed last night. Besides, if things really go south, we'll just slip one of your benzos into their beverage. I'll call up a buddy at the station, and we'll dump them out in Roxbury."

Logan snickered, then shook out the tension from his body. He crossed the floor and wrapped his arms around Clay. "You are the best."

"I know. Now kiss me."

He rested his lips against his boyfriend's forehead.

"That's not the kind of kiss I was thinking about."

Logan smiled. Clay was in a teasing mood. It had taken several weeks for his man to regain full strength in body and spirit after being shot. But they were solidly on track again. Logan had urged Clay to schedule a few sessions with Matt, in addition to the department mandated therapy, and while resistant at first, Clay had later told him he was grateful for Logan's insistence.

He cupped Clay's cheek as their lips fixed together. Logan swore his heart had strapped itself into a shoot and leapt into the sky. His soul screamed 'Wee!' as it

twisted and turned, plummeting toward the earth. He knew he'd have the same feeling, no matter how many times their lips met. Logan poured every ounce of hunger and desire into his kiss. Clay tasted salty and sweet; he'd been nibbling on the snacks, and Logan devoured him. Clay responded in kind, and Logan moaned. He released Clay's face and gripped his arms, then roamed across his chest to where his ribs protected his recently healed lungs. As much as he wanted to take this into the bedroom or over the couch; Anthony and Eric would be there any minute. He pulled back and did his best to calm his body so he didn't open the door with a raging boner.

"I'm going to hold you to that promise later." Clay said.

Logan dashed into the kitchen to get a glass of cold water. He gulped the whole thing in four swallows. He turned on the faucet for a refill, but jumped when the strobe light in the kitchen flashed. With his processors on, he heard someone banging on the door most of the time. But for his safety and Clay's peace of mind, they'd invested in a comprehensive home aware system that used flashing strobes and pillow shakers for things like the smoke detector, doorbell, their landline, and even emergency broadcast alerts.

He put the glass down and peaked his head around the corner. Clay stood in the living room, holding out his hand.

Okay. You can do this.

Logan nodded and walked toward the front door. He gripped the nob, released a breath and pulled it open. Sarge and Markham stood there with stupid grins on their faces, and Logan felt a layer of anxiety fall off his shoulders.

"Hi."

"Well, are you going to let us in, or do we have to provide the secret password first?"

Markham asked.

It was only the two of them. Maybe they changed their minds about bringing their better halves? Logan flung the door open and gestured for them to enter. As soon as his former teammates crossed the threshold, Logan found himself wrapped in his staff sergeant's arms.

"Goddamn I've missed you."

Logan returned the embrace and added a few firm back slaps. "Me too Sarge."

"Just Anthony now. I'm retired. Got out eight months ago. Sorry, it took us longer to get here. Traffic around here is insane."

"Yeah, there was a snail leading a protest. Very slow-moving cause. We had to yield."

Logan shook his head, same old Markham. "Next thing you'll tell me is that you stopped to watch a squirrel do yoga on a power line."

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

"I would totally respect the grind. Now shut up and give me a hug, Fucker."

Logan grabbed Markham tugged him close. "Good to see you, Dipshit."

Anthony said as he walked into the living room. "They still have the maturity of middle schoolers. Hi, I'm Anthony Long. Logan's former team leader. You must be Clay." He said, holding out his hand.

Clay held out his hand. "Nice to meet you."

Logan walked over and put his arm around Clay's waist. "Guys, this is the love of my life."

Anthony smiled and held out his hand to Eric. "Funny, I was about to say the same thing."

Logan's jaw dropped. His gaze ping-ponged between Anthony, Eric, and Clay. He pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?" Clay asked.

"Doing an integrity test on my processors. He couldn't have said what I thought he did."

"I would slap you upside the head, but I'm kind of afraid it might pop like a water balloon." Markham said.

"Can we all sit down?" Anthony asked. "I think it's time we set the jokes aside and confront the pink elephants in the room."

"More like the rainbow striped elephants," Logan mumbled.

Anthony growled, much like he had when he'd gotten fed up with the shenanigans from the squad. Logan held up his hands and led everyone over to the sofa and chair grouping. He and Clay each took a chair, while his teammates occupied the sofa. His teammates that were apparently a couple? Someone dig up Rod Serling, he'd officially entered the twilight zone.

"My house, so I get to decide who starts. Spill it." Logan ordered. "When did this happen? If you tell me you were together while we were over there, I might lose my shit."

Eric shook his head. "No. After what happened, I got transferred to D company, but PTSD is a viperous bitch. I couldn't sleep. I jumped at every sudden sound, and the team leader wisely didn't trust me with a loaded weapon. Ended up riding out my deployment in logistics then separated not long after my feet hit US soil again. I drifted from town to town, but because I was hitting the bottle and other substances hard, never stayed in one place for long." He paused and Anthony rubbed his back. "For a couple of months, I found myself living on the streets of DC. There's nothing quite as haunting as sleeping beneath the shadows of stone sentinels, carved in memory of those who died for freedom. People just like Mya, Greg, Will, Drew, Chase, and Brian. One night I was so drunk I thought it would be a great idea to add their names to the DC War Memorial. A USPP officer found and arrested me. Hindsight, I'm glad he caught me before I could deface a national monument, but man I was fucking pissed. I just wanted six names to be remembered. To be honored for their sacrifice. The officer recognized my Ranger patch and instead of turning me over to the Metropolitan Police, he signed me into a shelter for vets." He looked up at Logan. "Can I get a drink?"

Logan stood and headed for the kitchen, but stopped. "Umm, I not trying to be an ass, but what kind of drink?"

Eric smiled. "Water is fine." He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a coin. "385 days sober."

Anthony kissed the side of Eric's head. "So proud of you."

Logan filled a glass and brought the snacks into the living room. He handed the drink to Markham and set the platter on the coffee table. "Anybody else need something?"

"Sit down, Logan. I can play host." Clay said.

His legs collapsed from under him and he landed hard on the chair again. He was ashamed at how self centered he'd been for the past two years. Logan had assumed Markham and Long went on about their lives after the attack like nothing happened. Listening to Eric talk about his struggles was like getting gut punched by a Terminator.

"So how did the two of you..."

Anthony took Eric's hand. "After I got out, I needed a fresh start. I thought about going back to the Pacific Northwest, but after years in Georgia and everywhere else, my blood was muchtoo thin. Didn't know where I wanted to go though. I heard plenty of talk about P-Town over the years and figured I'd take some R&R there to figure out my next steps."

"Gotta say, your destination of choice is a surprise."

Eric laughed. "You should have been there when I came around a corner of the B&B I'd booked and came face to face with him. Nearly shit my pants."

Logan snickered. "I can only imagine. And I can assume you were there to admire the cape cod architecture and eclectic art galleries?"

"Sure. Also, it was Pride weekend, and I'd just earned my six-month chip."

He'd process that bit of new in a minute.

Logan looked at Anthony. "And that's why you never ratted me and Adams out? Because you're gay too?"

Eric whipped his head toward Anthony, then back toward Logan. "Wait! What? You and Brian?" His face blanched. "Oh fuck." He raced over to Logan and wrapped him in an embrace. "I'm so fucking sorry. Goddamn you fucker, why didn't you say anything? Logan ... he ... you... that day ... his head..."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

"Yeah. Off and on for a couple of years. And yes, there are times I still feel his brain matter sliding down my forearm."

He, Anthony, and Eric all paused for a moment. Memories of that day reflected in their eyes. Maybe at some point they could talk through the experience from their individual perspectives, but not yet.

"In full transparency, I'm demi." Anthony said.

"And I'm bi. I only ever talked about my girlfriends because it made it easier."

"Okay, so you started a vacation fling and realized your love for each other had lurked under the surface, waiting for the right opportunity to bloom?"

Anthony waved his hand back and forth. "We spent all our time together, reconnecting. There a lot of moments of vulnerability, of honesty, and shared hopes for the future. By the end of the week, Eric and I knew each other on a whole new level. As someone who's demi, I don't date. Never saw the appeal. But between our history in the Rangers and the confidences we'd shared on the cape, I felt a pull to explore a more intimate connection."

"I had to go back to DC, since my PTO was up. Anthony came back with me since he was footloose and fancy-free. I always thought he was hot, but he was also Red Ranger. Then he became Anthony. And now ... now he's my everything."

Logan watched as his former squad leader and riflemen shared a kiss. It was still weird. Then he stepped back from watching through the lens of Eric's team leader and

Anthony's direct report. He observed two men sharing an intimate moment. And then it made sense. Logan understood how their journey led them to this moment. Survival laid the foundation of their relationship. Friendship, respect, and empathy added layer after layer, leading to the capstone of love. The building blocks of their story differed from his and Clay's but the elements were identical.

"I'm happy for you guys—still a little shocked, but if I've learned anything in life, it's to be grateful for the gift of someone's love and to do everything you can to share what's in your heart. Opportunities like this don't always come around twice."

"Is that why you went dark after what happened to Adams?" Anthony asked.

Logan took Clay's hand. "Yes, and no. Like I said on the phone, I got lost." He looked across at Eric. "Not like you. After the Army gave me the big fat kiss off, I was lucky Clay took me in. Especially after ... well, that's a story for another time. But the viperous bitch TKO'd me too, and my head injury caused all kinds of problems. Spent a couple months in a rehab unit re-learning how to be a functional adult. I had all kinds of short-term memory issues, but constant flashbacks of the attack. I couldn't concentrate for shit and my decision-making ability was on par with a tween. Some of my motor functions were affected, and I had to do physical and occupational therapy to regain strength. I didn't speak for months. Not because I couldn't physically, but because I was locked in a world of silence. I am deaf. Hearing my voice was impossible. I was terrified what came out wouldn't match what I said in my head, and since I couldn't hear the other person anyway, I figured why bother? But now I have my implants, a great job, a circle of friends I'd love to introduce you to, and most importantly, I have Clay."

Clay leaned forward. "I know I'm kind of a fourth wheel to this conversation, but can I just say I'm so glad the three of you have risen from the ashes of that day? I don't know the two of you well, but I hope to change that. Logan has embraced my circle of friends, but he needs his brothers in arms. I'm so glad you've found each other

again. So, the two of you live in P-Town?"

Anthony smiled. "We moved into a restored waterfront warehouse a couple of months ago."

Logan whistled. He looked around his and Clay's humble apartment in Southie. This apartment was his sanctuary. He and Clay had confessed and explored their love within its walls, but a multi-million dollar abode it was not.

"I can see your wheels spinning, Logan. My grandpa, who served in the 1st Ranger Battalion in WWII, left me a trust. He survived North Africa, Sicily, and Italy then came home to start an electronics company. He developed chips that are still used in modern electronics. His company is still around and now specializes on neurotransmitter design. Don't ask me anything more because I don't understand any of it. I only ever lived off my pay from the Army. But now that I have Eric, I'm willing to spend every penny to make sure he'll thrive. He drug himself up from the dark filth laden streets into the light. He's my brother. My heart. My future. Our love deserves a safe place to flourish in community that embraces us."

"I don't disagree. But are you sure you want to hitch your wagon to his? I mean, this is Eric. He once bent over and split his trousers so far we all got to see if he used Charmin that day."

"Hey! I keep my ass so clean you could eat off it. In fact, just the other day Anthony—"

"And that's my cue to ask if anyone needs a refill." Clay said, standing up.

Logan stood and stepped around the coffee table. Eric and Anthony rose from the sofa and they wrapped their arms around each other in a huddle, like so many times in the field. Logan had convinced himself that they didn't need him and vice versa,

but hearing their voices and stories, seeing their faces and feeling their embrace made it crystal clear that brothers formed or found centered him in this turbulent cycle called life. He'd make sure to never forget that again.

"I'm so glad you found your way out of the darkness, Eric. Promise me you'll reach out if you feel it tug you backwards. I can't lose you again."

"You too. It's not been easy, and not without a slip here and there. What can I say? One could write an entire book about my rise, fall, and redemption."

Logan looked at Clay over his shoulder. "I know exactly what you mean."

Epilogue

Clay rolled over in bed. His hand stretched out, only to find space where Logan should be. The sheets still held the lingering warmth from Logan's body, so he knew his lover hadn't left their nest too long ago. He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The air in their bedroom was chilly despite the heater running at full steam. He heard sounds coming from the living room and, drug himself out of the warm covers to investigate.

After a quick stop in the bathroom, he donned some flannel sleep pants and entered the living room to see Logan kneeling in front of the Christmas tree, shaking boxes.

Clay laughed at the childlike behavior. Logan remained fixated on the shiny packages, and then Clay noticed his lover wasn't wearing his speech processors. He slipped back into the bedroom and saw them in the case on Logan's nightstand. Normally, Logan slipped them first thing. Their absence was a real testament to Logan's sense of security and excitement on Christmas morning.

Clay slipped the devices into his pocket and retrieved Logan's special gift from its

hiding spot in his closet. He crept up behind Logan—who now stood at the fireplace, moving stuff around on the mantel—and wrapped his arms around his love.

“I knew you were there,” Logan said, leaning back into Clay’s embrace.

Clay attached Logan’s processors and watched as Logan adjusted them to his liking. A quick blink of the LED indicator told Clay the power supply was active. He turned Logan in his arms and planted a kiss on the pliant lips waiting for him.

“Merry Christmas, honey.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

“Merry Christmas, Clay. What’d you get me?” Logan asked, smiling.

“So impatient.”

Logan nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

“Why don’t you light a fire? I’ll turn on the tree lights, then we can sip our coffee and enjoy the snow falling outside the windows?”

Logan huffed out a breath. “Fine, but I still want to open presents.”

Clay was doing everything he could not to burst out into hysterical laughter at Logan’s pouting expression. He flipped the switch to the tree lights and settled on the floor next to Logan. He picked up a gift he’d bought for Logan and held it out. Suddenly, he had a lapful of happy man, and for the life of him, he couldn’t think of anywhere else he’d rather be.

Twenty minutes later, a debris field of colorful paper covered the hardwood, and Logan was happily monkeying around with the latest version of the direct microphone system. The accessory allowed Logan to stream voices from across the room, right to his processors. It would be helpful when Logan had meetings at work, or had to attend webinars and conferences. Not to mention if they went out to a busy restaurant, Logan could isolate their table from the bulk of the environment. The piece was just one more tool to help Logan take control of his communication.

Clay sat on the couch sipping his coffee and, as he’d suggested earlier, enjoying the warmth from their fireplace and the picturesque snow. He had one last gift for Logan

and was just waiting for the right time to present it.

Clay's contemplations were interrupted when Logan flopped onto the sofa beside him.

He set his mug on the side table then gathered Logan against his side.

"You happy?" he asked.

"Yes. I have one last gift for you, Clay."

Clay saw the small box in Logan's outstretched hand. It looked remarkably similar to the one in his pocket. He dug his out and held it up.

"Imagine that? So do I."

Logan's eyes widened, and the brightest smile Clay had ever seen lit up his love's face. With childish exuberance, they both tore into the gifts. Clay's hands shook as he lifted the lid on the small square box. Inside was a dark gray titanium band. He watched Logan open his own box. Clay had chosen one almost identical for Logan, only his had hints of rainbow red and green reflecting in the polished surface. He'd thought the faint hues would be a poignant reminder of the holiday. Their eyes met, and as one, they leaned forward.

Their lips met and their fingers locked together, the boxes in their laps forgotten as they shared a perfect moment. When they finally separated, they both spoke simultaneously.

"Marry me?"

"When you gave me your love, you made my dreams come true. I've captured

perfection and have no intention of letting you go, now or in the future. Make love to me, Logan? I need to feel you inside me.”

“I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.”

Clay picked up the box lying on Logan’s lap. “Now?”

Logan shook his head. “I want to wait ‘til the ceremony. This first time this ring goes on my finger should be when I say ‘I do’.”

As usual, Logan’s wishes matched his. He knew the moment Logan’s ring slid over his skin, it would seal their bond for life. The bond that had taken twenty-two years to build. The bond that wove their lives together and, despite a few tears, had healed stronger than when it had formed. He placed the matching boxes on the ottoman.

“Wait here,” he said.

Clay went into the bedroom and stripped the comforter and pillow from their bed. He carried them into the living room and made a nest in front of the fireplace. When all was ready, he waited for his fiancé to join him. Logan’s sensual stride closed the distance between them. They undressed each other with lingering kisses and stimulating caresses as inches of smooth skin were bared.

Clay sank into the soft nest of blankets, the glow of the fire spreading warmth across his skin. Logan settled above him and Clay spread his legs, cradling Logan’s lean hips as their cocks brushed against one another.

Logan’s taste was sweet nectar on his tongue. Their lips danced, and Clay’s mind centered on the pleasure he’d only experienced making love to Logan. His hands cupped Logan’s ass, holding his love in the crux of his body. Their mouths separated, and Clay arched his neck. A sigh escaped when Logan’s mouth traced his jawline and

down the column of his neck, licking at the skin. Clay's desire grew and his hands roamed over the smooth, muscled skin of Logan's back. He buried his nose in Logan's broad chest above him, inhaling his lover's musky scent.

Logan's head dipped and his mouth latched onto one of Clay's nipples. A sharp cry of ecstasy rent the air, and Clay's stomach clenched. His cock wept with need. Logan scooted down, and Clay whimpered with regret until he felt soft wet licks caress his cock. Clay moaned in approval and gasped as Logan's mouth covered his cock, swallowing him all the way to the base. The heat of Logan's mouth seared the sensitive skin.

"Oh fuck ... Logan." Clay drove his hips upwards in abandon.

Logan teased him by drawing away from his dick. His mouth hovered above the head. Tiny licks fluttered across the mushroomed glans. The tip of Logan's tongue dipped into the slit to gather drops of Clay's essence. Up and down the hard shaft, Logan's tongue danced. The touches were soft and fleeting, as if Clay only imagined them. He propped himself up on his elbows to watch. Anticipation of the moist heat from Logan's mouth caused his thigh muscles to tense as his cock twitched.

The heat from the fire and arousal coursing through his system created a fine sheen of sweat on his chest and abdomen. Just as Clay was about to lose his mind, Logan finally relented and sucked his cock. The sensation of wet heat and suction was so great Clay fell back onto the blankets, closing his eyes to savor the unimaginable feelings. He lifted his legs and held them against his chest, opening his body to Logan's touch.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:07 pm

He heard a faint click, then cool fingers circled his opening. He wanted some part of Logan inside him so badly he pushed into the seeking digits, demanding Logan's possession of his body. Two fingers thrust deep into his body.

Oh fuck me, please.

Clay's chest heaved with deep breaths. The healed tissue expanded and contracted without pain. His legs shook and blinding pleasure spread outward from the core of his body. Another finger entered him, and the tips brushed over his prostate. The feelings were so intense they were almost painful. Logan sucked Clay's cock and thrust his fingers in perfect rhythm.

Clay moaned and cried out, begging for more.

Logan reared up, and their faces were only a couple of inches apart.

"You want my cock, Clay? You wanna feel me deep inside you? Every inch filling you, 'til we don't know where I stop and you begin?"

Incapable of words, Clay nodded vigorously.

The head of Logan's cock pushed against his opening, demanding entry. Clay bore down in welcome, and when Logan bit one nipple while thrusting deep inside him, Clay lost it and screamed. Logan's balls nestled against his ass and his hips swiveled, burrowing his cock deeper inside Clay's core. Clay's hands lost their grip on his legs, and they dropped over Logan's arms. His lover's strength was more than capable of supporting their weight as he plowed into Clay over and over. Logan fucked him hard

and fast.

Clay arched into each stroke. His cock slapped against his abdomen, leaving kisses of pre-cum pooling in his navel. Sweat coated their bodies, and the lights from the Christmas tree turned into colorful halos. Logan's mouth fused with Clay's, his tongue thrusting in rhythm with the cock demolishing his previous conceptions of ecstasy.

He surrendered to the demands of his body.

Clay wrenched his mouth away from Logan's. "Logan!"

The lights dancing behind his eyelids exploded into fireballs of ecstasy. Every muscle, every tendon in his body stiffened, and he came. Hot semen shot over Clay's stomach and chest.

"Look at me, Clay!"

He forced his eyes open as the waves of euphoria consumed his entire being, and he stared into the smoky blue orbs burning with desire for him.

Logan tilted Clay's hips. He buried his cock to its maximum depth and froze. A primal roar echoed in the room as heat filled Clay's ass.

They spent the rest of the day loving each other, and when the sky darkened and the temperatures dropped outside their haven, they held each other tight. The warmth of their bodies and the beat of the hearts nestled next to each other was all the comfort they needed.